

THE CIRCUS BOYS

FRANK GORDON OLIVER

125dr

Cyril Wolfgang
from

Bill Orwig

Dec. 25, 1920.







A DRESSING-TENT WAS RIGGED UP IN THE REAR OF THE
EXHIBITION-TENT

The
Circus Boys

or

The Novelty Circus Company

By

FRANK G. OLIVER

AUTHOR OF "THE ATHLETIC BOYS," ETC.

CHICAGO

ALBERT WHITMAN & COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

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*To my parents, with whose
sympathy and encouragement
this book has been written*



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The Circus Boys

or

The Novelty Circus Company

CHAPTER I

THE NOTICE ON THE DOOR

"It's six minutes of one, Ed. Hurry up!"

Robert Beebe looked at his watch, and shoved it impatiently before the eyes of his companion.

"Hold on! I want to see what's on the door over there."

"I don't see anything."

"I do. Looks like a notice of some sort," declared Edward Donough, trying to draw Robert in the direction of a large, two-story building on the opposite side of the street. A sheet of paper flapped mysteriously in the wind on the panel of a door which opened on the ground floor.

"I'm going across," added Edward.
 "Coming?"

"We'll be late."

"You will, if you stand there much longer."

Edward Donough was already almost to the walk on the other side; and Robert, half hesitant before, now dashed suddenly after his friend and came up in an instant at the place where Edward was scanning the paper.

"What is it?" demanded he, breathing hard.

Edward pointed silently to this typewritten paragraph :

June 5.

The Novelty Circus Company will hold a meeting of unusual importance in Novelty Circus Hall to-night, June 5, commencing sharply at eight. All members are earnestly requested to be in attendance.

RICHARD DENESMORE, President.

"What do you suppose Rich has in his

head now?" asked Robert, staring hard at the notice.

"Brains, most likely!" answered Edward, tersely. "I don't know. Better ask him."

"Don't chaff, Ed. What does he mean, anyway? You ought to know, seeing you are the vice-president of the company."

"Well, I don't."

The clang of the one-o'clock school bell sent the two boys sprinting up the street. They dropped into their seats, hot and gasping, without an instant to spare. Both were utterly mystified by the notice and were eager to be enlightened. Under the circumstances, the two-page assignment in Latin and a knotty history lesson held little fascination for either Robert or Edward, and they gave it up as a bad job and turned their attention to passing interrogatory notes among other members of the company who were nearest.

It soon became evident that nothing whatever was known of their president's motive,

so far as Stanley Carr, Harry Stover or Jesse Cartland were concerned. All had seen the notice, which had been posted in the morning, but all were completely in the dark. Richard Denesmore himself was out of the assembly room attending recitations during the entire afternoon ; hence no satisfaction was to be gotten from him. Had the boys stopped to think, they would assuredly have remembered that Richard was not the one to give a great deal of information beforehand, when he had called a special meeting for that purpose.

The note-writing went on, much to the detriment of school work and with an unconscious disregard for consequences. That the preceptress saw what was going on, they knew but were too preoccupied to heed seriously ; and five boys looked up chagrined but vaguely relieved, when she said sarcastically :

“ If the Novelty Circus Company is so anxious to hold a meeting, perhaps we had

best adjourn and give them the use of the room."

A general laugh followed, and the note-passing stopped.

Before they were fairly out of doors at the close of the afternoon session, Robert clutched Edward by the coat-sleeve.

"Say, Ed, how on earth did she know that our notes had anything to do with the business of the company?"

"Simple enough! She knows that we five are members, and she probably saw the notice. It was good of her to turn it off that way. We must have been corresponding thick and hot."

"You bet it was good of her. I flunked square on my Latin to-day, but I don't do it again right away, I can tell you. I'm going home to study now. We might as well wait until eight as matters are."

"I'll be along five minutes of eight," said Edward, as the two boys separated on the corner.

“ All right, I’ll be ready. So long ! ”

There were comparatively few persons in Quarry who had never seen the interior of Novelty Circus Hall. There were some, of course, who had never taken the opportunity, but you could count those persons on your fingers (again speaking comparatively) ; which is to say that the Novelty Circus Company enjoyed a generous share of greatness. The facts of the matter were these : Three years before our story opens, the county of LaGrande, of which Quarry was the seat, had erected a fine stone structure to replace the former court-house, and the old building, a two-story, wooden affair with huge white columns in front, had been sold for a trifling sum to a stock company of Quarry business men. It had been moved at the expense of the county, and had been set upon a good site a block south of Main Street.

The stock company which purchased the building intended originally to alter the interior of the structure and by the addition of

a stage and gallery to make a small opera-house of it ; but the idea had been abandoned, and the remodeling was never done. The upper story, which was the old courtroom, was sometimes rented as a hall, but the ground floor would have remained untouched had it not been for Richard Denesmore and the Novelty Circus Company.

To Richard, the president and originator of the company, belonged the credit of striking a sharp bargain with the stockholders. The only home the Novelty Circus Company had possessed up to this time was a roomy barn loft which had been fitted up comfortably and ingeniously. In a way this location had been well enough for awhile ; but the company, to a boy, believed that it was entitled to headquarters of greater pretension. For these reasons, Richard Denesmore was hailed as a benefactor worthy of reward, when he announced that he had secured the whole ground floor of the old court-house, with the express privilege of remodeling it

to any extent which would not damage the appearance, value, or security of the building, at a ridiculously low rental.

The company wasted no moments. The boys' first move was to tear out several of the partitions which had served to divide the county offices. Among the fifteen boys were those who had no little skill and natural ability in many branches of work ; so that the three or four whose tastes and efforts had given them some practical ideas in carpentry needed only the advice and "bossing" of an experienced workman and the assistance of the other members of the company to change the plan of the lower floor to agree with the plans which had previously been drawn up and approved by the boys as a body. Of course, the work required time and patience, but the boys persevered, and were well pleased when it was completed.

The new arrangement gave them two spacious rooms at the front of the building, opening off on either side of a large centre

aisle which ran back to a hall of a seating capacity of perhaps two hundred. The company continued to hustle; and by dint of faithful labor among themselves and their friends, one of these front rooms was equipped at last with a small but entirely creditable library, in addition to the current papers and magazines and an exhaustive assortment of games. The room was papered in a deep red; a rug to match was purchased and placed on the floor; and neatly-framed portraits and paintings added an ornamental touch to the walls. Other furnishings consisted of a generous supply of tables and chairs. The opposite room was fitted up as a gymnasium, and the fact that nearly all its apparatus was home-made did not lessen its attractiveness in the least.

At the rear of the hall, which was in reality a small theatre, a stage of considerable proportions had been constructed. The boys had met with difficulties in building it which might easily have puzzled older heads, and

they were justly proud that all had come out satisfactorily. In the manufacture of a drop curtain, scenery, and other stage paraphernalia, the company had exhibited its greatest skill. The hall or theatre was painted in blue with gold trimmings, also the work of the boys. Library, gymnasium, and theatre were lighted by electricity. This was expensive, but the boys were determined to have the lights, and they saved much of the cost of putting them in by doing most of the wiring themselves under the supervision of an electrician. The power they obtained from the lighting plant at a fair figure.

The combined expense of these and other improvements, even in addition to the labor the company itself had expended, ran to a rather extravagant sum; but by using all their treasury contained and by digging cheerfully into their own pockets, the boys came out clear, and the first series of entertainments which they gave in their new home

replenished the empty treasury and replaced the money they had spent individually.

Promptly at eight o'clock—for promptness was one of Richard Denesmore's good qualities—the president of the Novelty Circus Company called the meeting to order. The fourteen boys who had been talking and laughing in the library gathered about him expectantly.

"Members of the Novelty Circus Company," said Richard, pleasantly, as he stood up before them, tall and of good bearing, without the air of "wanting to be the whole earth," as Stanley Carr put it, "as this is not a regular meeting, we will dispense with the roll-call and report, and get down to business at once. I know you are here to discover what this meeting has been called for, and I'm here to tell you."

"When?" suggested Jesse Cartland, dryly.

"Immediately," replied Richard, smiling. "The fact is, gentlemen, I've gotten hold of an idea that is an idea. I believe it's a great

idea, and one that the company wants and wants right away ; but I'll let you judge for yourselves. The funny thing about the matter is that although the idea seems to belong to me now, I'd have hard work to prove title. In other words, it is partly—borrowed ! ”

The boys laughed.

“ You know as well as I do,” continued Richard, becoming serious again, “ that as a company we've been wonderfully successful, and have made more money and put it to a better use than any other boys' organization of the kind which you can name. At least, we've earned more money, and if we haven't put it to the best use possible, the fault isn't ours.”

There was a cheer at this.

“ The only difficulty is the scarcity of novel and original ideas for our entertainments. We've kept up the significance of the Company's name a long time now, but I will leave it to you, if it hasn't become almost impossible to get new material.”

"It took us nearly two weeks to find stuff for our last entertainment," attested Carl Dennison.

"What we need is to get our eyes open," remarked Stanley Carr, rising; "but if our president's got his open, why we are willing and ready to listen to the result."

"Hear! Hear!" cried several. "We're waiting for your idea, Mr. President."

"Entirely at your service, gentlemen," Richard went on, good-humoredly. "I merely wanted to assure myself that you were willing to listen to this idea, which I have not been able to boast a great deal about, as only a part of it belongs to me. It came in a letter I received a day ago from a cousin of mine in Albany, New York. And I'll tell you what that letter contained."

The boys leaned forward, breathlessly attentive. All the preliminary fun had not deceived them as to the worth of what Richard really had to say.

"It said that my cousin had just seen

the most novel circus ever invented. It was given by thirteen or fourteen men in a big tent. Every man had drilled himself or been drilled to represent and imitate a certain animal in all sorts of wonderful and laughable 'stunts.' Each performer wore the skin complete of the animal he imitated. They got up a big parade, and the show drew thousands. So far as my cousin knew, no similar thing had ever been attempted before, and yet the whole make-up was as simple as A, B, C. It was a decided hit."

"And you think we can do the same thing?" demanded Harvey Coulter—"Babe" the boys called him, because he was so small and chunky—getting excitedly out of his chair.

"Why not?" asked Richard, questioning him in return. "I ask all of you, members of the Novelty Circus Company, why not?"

"Mr. President." Ralph O'Leary jumped to his feet.

"Mr. President."

“Mr. President.”

Five others were on the floor, impatient to be heard.

“Mr. O’Leary,” said Richard, recognizing the first speaker.

“How can we ——” some one put in, heedlessly.

“Mr. O’Leary has the floor,” announced the president, firmly.

“I should like to ask,” said Ralph, “how we can hope to get up such a circus as you just now suggested, without going to great expense and so cutting out practically all of the profits. I can’t see how we are going to have skins made for us and have them good representations of the animals we imitate, unless we expend a big sum of money. Of course, I don’t pretend to know much about such material as that kind of a show must have, but right on the start, it looks as though the stuff would be expensive and hard to get hold of. It’s a splendid scheme, but I don’t see how it’s going to be worked

out, that's all! Our motto has always been 'The lowest expenses and the highest profits.' We've lived up to that motto so far, and everybody has been treated fairly. I don't think it's good sense to go back on it now. It certainly isn't economy."

"What a kicker that fellow is, Ed!" whispered Robert Beebe, disgustedly, as Ralph sat down.

"Just a little contrary, that's all. Watch Rich bring him around," commented Edward.

But Ralph's words had made their impression on the other members. It threw the whole matter into a new light. If expenses were going to be exorbitant, the Novelty Circus Company would be foolish to undertake anything of the kind. The circus would have to be given up!

"I was just about to say before Mr. Coulter interrupted," added Richard, "that the matter of skins will not have to be considered for a moment. No doubt Mr. O'Leary is

sincere in what he has said, but he doesn't know what I know at the present time. The Novelty Circus Company is welcome to the best skins on the market for practically—nothing!”

Fourteen boys stared at the president in astonishment. Was he joking again? Richard was smiling, but his black eyes were perfectly frank.

CHAPTER II

PREPARATIONS FOR THE CIRCUS

RICHARD DENESMORE was thirteen years old when he became president of the Novelty Circus Company. The people of Quarry had been working hard to raise funds for a small public library; and every club and society in the place were holding fairs and bazaars and contributing the proceeds to the fund. Richard wanted to see the library idea carried out, and was eager to help. He thought over the matter until he hit upon a plan. In his class at school, not counting three girls, there were fourteen other boys beside himself. He banded the boys together and gave a circus, and he managed the circus so well that the boys' efforts resulted in a good show, a good attendance, and forty dollars by way of returns. After this full-fledged suc-

cess, Richard concocted another idea, and that idea did not stop growing when he organized the fifteen boys into a company, which called itself the Novelty Circus Company and cast its first vote for Richard Denesmore, president.

Richard's idea continued to expand. The following year, the three girls in the class moved away, and the fifteen members of the Novelty Circus Company found that they constituted the freshman class in the Quarry high school, with four years between them and graduation. Up to this time the headquarters of the company had been in an empty barn whose loft had been fitted up in an ingenious way; but within the heart of every one of the fifteen boys and especially within the heart of Richard Denesmore, burned the ambition to have a home of greater convenience and attractiveness. When the old court-house in Quarry was moved to make place for the new, their opportunity came. Fifteen boys could not

have been more genuinely delighted than were the members of the Novelty Circus Company at the prospect of realizing their dreams.

The company so early showed its willingness to aid others less fortunate by gifts of money or other kindnesses, and so frequently emptied its treasury in order to carry out some charitable act, that the citizens of Quarry soon came to take an honest pride in the boys and to give them a lavish amount of patronage. As time went on, every person in the town who took interest in the company became convinced that the boys invariably exerted their utmost to please, were appreciative, and put their substantial earnings to excellent uses. In fact, the company enjoyed almost an over-indulgence from the people of Quarry, and was quite in their good graces.

But these qualities were by no means the only inducement which drew the public to Novelty Circus Hall in great numbers and

with full purses. Originality and novelty were the boys' two great specialties—the "novelty" in the company's name was lived up to very well, indeed, and its patrons came to know this fact and to rely upon it. They could be sure, whenever an entertainment was advertised, that some new and extraordinary feature awaited them, and it is safe to say they were never disappointed.

With this enviable reputation, the Novelty Circus Company grew and flourished. All liked Richard Denesmore, and were proud of him as their president. And there is no doubt that he made a good one. He understood the boys thoroughly. He knew their likes and their dislikes, and was diplomat enough to quell any little jealousies which showed signs of arising. True, he sometimes made mistakes, but no one was quicker than he to correct them. Usually, he was level-headed and sensible, and was cautious enough to look before he stepped.

There was but one thing in the growing

popularity of the company which troubled him. That was the increasing difficulty of finding new and fresh ideas. Recently, indeed, a point had been reached where ideas, at least those which had not been worn threadbare, seemed to end. To the fourteen boys it looked very much as if they were "up a stump!" and were likely to stay there. Despite each one's zest and enthusiasm, it was becoming more and more of a serious problem to keep up the company's standard.

Richard studied for some time, trying to find a remedy. He went back over the sources from which the company had obtained original and out-of-the-way matter in the past, but everything there seemed to have been exhausted. It was annoying, to say the least, and fourteen other wide-awake but baffled boys were inclined to agree with him.

The letter from his cousin, Kenneth Seton, caused Richard to tack about on a new

course. Here was the very idea the Novelty Circus Company wanted and had been looking for a considerable time. If the boys entered into the spirit of the thing properly,—and it would be as unlikely that they wouldn't as for the sun to set in the South,—the circus could be made such a success as Quarry in all her history had never seen produced.

Richard knew that the best test of the worth of his idea was the disappointment on the boys' faces when they had thought for the moment that the circus would have to be given up. Richard's statement, the next instant, that they need pay nothing for the skins surprised and bewildered them. They were taken unawares, and could only stare incredulously at the president.

“Is your cousin going to give us the skins, Mr. President?” questioned Harvey Coulter, the first to recover. “You didn't say anything about his being connected with the show they gave in New York.”

“ I don’t think he was connected with it,” replied Richard. “ Let me explain a little more of what I know about this. Kenneth—that’s my cousin—wrote me, that if we wanted to give the show, we could have the use of the skins free of charge as long as we wanted to use them. He said he could get them through his father, so I imagine my uncle was connected in some way with the affair. Of course, we would have to pay freight, but in this case it wouldn’t amount to much. And as far as Kenneth’s concerned, when he says he’ll do a thing, you can depend upon his doing it ! ”

“ Three cheers for Kenneth Seton, fellows ! ” exclaimed Robert Beebe, enthusiastically. “ He’s a real public benefactor.”

The boys laughed, but gave them with a will, and again the company settled down to business.

“ Will some one make a motion that the circus be given ? ” resumed Richard.

"Mr. President," interrupted a boy on one of the back seats.

"Mr. O'Leary."

"I wonder if that fellow means to kick up another fuss, Ed?" grumbled Robert Beebe in an undertone, as Ralph O'Leary rose to his feet.

"Before we go any further," said Ralph, "I'd like to ask a question. Suppose that by giving this show we make ourselves liable to prosecution by the men who first gave it in New York?"

"I suppose he thinks we would be hanged by the necks until dead!" whispered Robert aside to Edward.

"You mean, would we be infringing on their rights?" asked Richard.

"Yes."

"I don't think so. In the first place, we're not professionals in the circus business. There wouldn't be much of an excuse to hinder our performances. The very fact that Kenneth is able to offer us the skins would go to contradict that."

Ralph sat down, and Richard again asked for a motion. It was made and seconded.

"The motion is made and seconded that the circus be given," said the president. "All in favor will respond with the usual sign."

"Aye!" chorused the boys.

"Contrary, the same."

There was absolute silence in the room.

"The motion is unanimously carried," announced the president.

"Now about the matter of fixing upon a date," Richard went on, after a moment. "It may be well to leave that question until a little later,—say, 'til our next meeting. At that time, the committees we appoint to-night will be ready to report, and we will know a little more about the best time for giving it than we do now."

"Let's get at the committee business," suggested Stanley Carr.

This was speedily done. Committees were selected on advertising, grounds, tent

and other apparatus, and paraphernalia in the way of vehicles and material for the parade. "For," said Richard, "a good deal will depend upon the advertising we do in the parade, and we want to make it a good one."

While this work was going on, suggestions for the coming event came thick and fast. The committees were instructed as to a hundred different details. The company began to see more and more possibilities in the circus, and the boys' enthusiasm increased with the minutes. They were already convinced that the show was going to be a grand success. It was a late hour when the meeting adjourned, to convene again four days later.

"Going my way?" said Richard to Edward Donough, as the two boys passed out of Novelty Circus Hall.

Edward glanced at his watch. "It's half-past ten, but the groceries can't have closed yet. If you don't mind walking around"—

"Perfectly willing!" assented Richard,

putting on his hat and falling into step with Edward.

The boys walked on in silence for awhile.

"I suppose," said Richard, "that after you saw the notice of our special meeting, you wondered why I hadn't told you my plan before. I hope you didn't think I was keeping it from you because I hadn't any faith in your judgment or advice."

"Not a bit!" answered Edward, straightforwardly. "I didn't lose any sleep over the matter; didn't even think of it."

"You would have been the first one I should have confided in, if I had anybody. I'll tell you why I didn't. If we had talked this over beforehand, you might have had a good many ideas on the subject; but the matter would have been more or less cut and dried in your mind, and you wouldn't have given half the number of really ingenious suggestions that you did to-night, when the thing was sprung upon all of you for the first time."

“ You mean that to-night one suggestion brought out another, and so on ? ”

“ Exactly. You wouldn’t have seen the possibilities so clearly, if it had been the other way. It was new to all of you ; you were working together ; and the ideas just naturally popped out of your heads as fast as you could speak.”

Edward laughed. “ I shouldn’t wonder if you were right, Rich. It’s a great theory, anyway. And as far as the circus is concerned, it’s a foregone success.”

“ Can’t help it, Ed,” said Richard. “ Look what enthusiasm there was to-night. When the company takes hold of a thing like that, look out ! And another thing, Ed. We must talk this thing up together all we can. I want to hear every suggestion you think of. We want to make this thing a success,— a big success that’ll stagger Quarry and revive our reputation for something novel with a vengeance. And incidentally we want to make some money.”

"Have you ever thought how easily the company makes money, and how hard it is for a fellow to do the same thing alone?" asked Edward.

"Yes, I have. I've just been thinking—or trying to figure out how I can earn a little on my own hook. The fact is, next year I'll have graduated, and I'm determined to go to college somewhere."

"Rich," said Edward, "I'm going to college, too. That is, I want to. But as things stand now, I'd have to look out for half my expenses, at least."

"That's my case, exactly. Wonder if we couldn't coöperate."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work to advantage. Do you know what I've been thinking of?"

"No."

"Well, I've been wondering if the Novelty Circus Company couldn't begin now to put all its earnings into a college fund. There must be a good many of the fellows who intend to take a higher course."

"Did you stop to count up how much each of us would have when it was divided?"

"That's so; wouldn't be a drop in the bucket, would it?—unless we made an enormous sum."

"Which we couldn't possibly do," put in Richard.

"Not all the fellows need the money. There's Carr, and Stover,—yes, and O'Leary. Their folks are well enough off."

"But that isn't saying that they could be deprived of their share of the money."

"You're right. I guess my scheme is worthless," remarked Edward. "All the same, I mean to see what I can do about getting together enough money for the first year."

The boys stopped at the grocery, and Edward made his purchases.

"Did Kenneth say in his letter just what the animals were?" asked Edward, as they came out of the store.

"He didn't mention all of them, but if I remember rightly, he spoke of the elephant,

the orang-outang, and the mule as 'taking the cake.' I think he said something about a camel, too."

"Consider, will ye, what a combination that makes—an elephant, orang-outang, mule, and camel!" exclaimed Edward, laughing heartily. "All we need is a tawny lion, a grizzly bear, and a giraffe to complete a menagerie such as the world has never looked upon—and an English-speaking menagerie at that!"

"The animals you have named would require just eleven boys," declared Richard, making an estimate. "You see, the elephant would take two, the camel two, the giraffe two, and each of the others one."

"I can almost see the animals as they will look upon show day. Think of the stunts we can work in! Think of the combination acts! Why, it seems almost as though I could figure out a thousand of them this minute."

Richard laughed. "I say, Ed, don't lose

too much sleep over the matter. You don't want to drown in your ideas, you know."

"It seems a shame to me," observed Edward after a moment's reflection, "that we go through all this training and work for one or two days' show. What a thing it would be, if we could go around to other towns with the circus!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Richard, in surprise.

Edward did not realize exactly what he did mean, so suddenly had the thought come to him. But in an instant he felt that he had been wishing for a long time to do that very thing. The whole plan unfolded in a twinkling before his eyes.

"Richard H. Denesmore, wouldn't that be simply *great*!—to go about like a real professional company. Think of it!" he gasped out.

"Are you crazy, Ed? How are you going to take fifteen boys on a trip like that? Get the idea out of your head. You'd have to have a set of angels in order to get along."

"Sense or nonsense, it would be great to do it, anyway," insisted Edward, stoutly.

As the boys reached Edward's home, he waited only to say a last word, looking Richard squarely in the face.

"I can't help how much you pooh-pooh me," he declared. "I've got a feeling that you haven't heard the last of my idea."

"You're dreaming," laughed Richard, good-naturedly.

"No, I'm not," said Edward, turning to leave. "Something's going to come of it—mark my word!"

CHAPTER III

BEFORE THE AFTERNOON PERFORMANCE

*The Novelty Circus Company
Will Present*

At Ferndale Commons

The Startling and Unheard-of Novelty :

!!! "Human Animals" !!!

July 2 and 3. July 2 and 3. July 2 and 3.

An Aggregation of Wonders :

English-speaking Bears. Singing Mules.

Giraffes Which Are Poets.

Camels—Zebras—Lions—Elephants.

Exhibiting Marvelous Human Intellect !!

The Last Link Between Animal and Man.

*An Orang-outang With the Wisdom
of Solomon.*

*Nothing of the Kind Has Been Seen in This
Part of the World.*

*Two and One-half Hours of Fun, Laughter,
and Instruction.*

Don't Forget the Date !!!

Admission \$.25.

The company begs to state that a great deal of labor has been put upon its latest attempt to amuse and instruct the public. The show is something entirely new, and will please every class. In fact, we predict that our patrons will see the "circus of their lives!"

"That's the best poster the company ever got out," exclaimed Edward Donough, as he paused for the hundredth time that week to read one of the bills. "Eh, Robert?"

"Cracking good!" commented his chum. "Rich wrote it up, didn't he?"

"You forget, my dear Mr. Beebe," answered Edward, laughing, "that I was on the printing committee."

"Well, it's pretty well typed, that's a fact," admitted Robert, pretending to misinterpret his friend's meaning.

"True; but I didn't do that part of it," said Edward, shaking his head in feigned sorrow. "I see that I can expect no encouragement for my literary ability from you."

"Don't feel offended, Ed," remarked

Robert, as he wiped away an imaginary tear. "Remember, friendships have been broken off for more trifling quarrels than this!"

"But not chumships."

Edward was about to go on with this harmless banter when a violent tug on his coat whirled him half around. Robert was pointing excitedly to another huge yellow show-bill not far from the company's poster.

"Look there!" he gasped, as though he had discovered some man-eating monster.

The show-bill was the advertisement of Waring & Wells' Consolidated Shows which would exhibit at Quarry on July second, giving two "magnificent performances."

"What of it?" asked Edward, carelessly.

"What of it?" repeated Robert, staring at his friend in a dazed way. "What of it? You don't mean to say that the Novelty Circus Company is going to show on the same day in the face of that?"

"Why not?" demanded Edward, seriously.

"Compete with a professional company? Are you out of your head?"

"Don't get excited, Robert. Look at it in the right way. We had our bills up two weeks before Waring & Wells advertised their show."

"When did the other fellows come around?"

"Two days ago. Haven't you noticed their bills before?"

"Saw them, but thought they were old. I didn't take time to examine them."

"Well, in the first place, we had our date fixed and our circus advertised ten or eleven days before the other people put in an appearance. Richard doesn't like the looks of it any more than you do, but he won't back out under the circumstances. He won't flunk now, as long as we've done our advertising. It would look small."

"You've talked with him then?"

"Yes. That's the way he looks at it, and he's going to call a meeting to-morrow

night. When he gets through talking, you'll be with him."

"Rich is crazy!"

"Listen to reason, Robert. We've got a good reputation as a company, and the people know what to expect from us. We've struck something new and interesting. Waring & Wells is a one-horse show with the same worn-out paraphernalia that Quarry has seen year after year. If our posters haven't convinced people who are skeptical of the fact that our show is superior to theirs, then our parade will do the work. I've been thinking this matter over, and I believe Richard is right. I don't like to guarantee that we'll get most of the patronage, but we'll have our share."

"That sounds plausible enough, but I don't know. It looks to me as if we were up against it hard, and had better back out."

"And let the other fellows in first, I suppose you mean," observed Edward, a little contemptuously. "Robert, I thought you

had more sense and backbone than to suggest that."

"I meant, why couldn't we have our show before the second of July," Robert amended, somewhat sheepishly.

"Because, working as hard as we can, we won't be any too ready on that date. You know, yourself, how matters stand. We can't hustle any faster than we are."

"I suppose you think I'm a coward, and want to run for safety as hard as I can," said Robert. "I'm not. Only, it seems to me as though we were foolhardy to oppose the other circus. I wish I could believe, as you do, that Waring & Wells don't amount to shucks, and that our patrons will stick by us. The fact is, Ed, we've put a lot of time and expended money on this scheme, and if it fails, on account of running up against these other fellows, it's just so much work thrown away."

"Pshaw! old fellow, you're getting pessimistic. I'm going to take what you said just

now with a grain of salt. I don't believe it, and what's more, I don't think you do, either. You've been talking just to show up the awful side of the affair and to frighten both of us. I think that the best way is to plunge into the business as though we were looking for success and nothing else, and we'll find it."

"In other words," said Robert, grinning, and a little ashamed of his prejudices, "'Never trouble Trouble, till Trouble troubles you.'"

"Shake on that, Robert," added Edward, heartily. And the hand-clasp of the two boys ended the first thought of failure in the company's new venture; if it could have ended the last, it is doubtful whether the members of the Novelty Circus Company would have had the stirring adventures which they were to experience within the next few weeks.

It is safe to say that Robert Beebe was not the only one who was alarmed at first sight by Waring & Wells' advertisements. Richard

Denesmore had been fully as fearful, for the moment, that the circus would have to be given up, or else held at a later day. But Richard had a stubborn perseverance in him that did not yield easily, and under adverse circumstances fought only the harder and more cheerfully. Even before he could stop the thumping of his heart caused by the coincidence of the dates, he began to reason out the matter.

He knew that "Human Animals" could not be given a day even before the time set. The boys were working as hard and as faithfully as they possibly could, and it would be lucky if everything was completed on time. On the other hand, it was foolishness to exhibit later than July second. In consequence, Richard saw very clearly that the only course that lay open was to compete with the other circus. It was rather a bold thing to do, on the whole ; but the more the president of the Novelty Circus Company thought on the matter, the firmer became his conviction that

the company could manage it successfully, if it went ahead in a straightforward manner. The handicap was not a trifling one; but Richard, since he realized that it would be impossible to change the date to an earlier day, and equally impracticable to give the circus later than July second, resolved to let matters rest as they were and to face the music, believing that success might yet be possible.

Once he had made this resolution, he set about planning what he could say to the other members of the company to bring them to his way of thinking. This was the day on which the posters of the other show appeared, and the day after, he had a long talk with Edward, the vice-president of the company. Edward had just seen the bills, and he, too, was anxious about the outcome; but when he understood Richard's views, he agreed with him that braving it out was the only justifiable course. Thereupon Richard called a special meeting of the company, and set

forth briefly and convincingly what under the circumstances seemed best to do. Not one objection was made; and the boys resumed their preparations with greater enthusiasm than before. They were working now not only to make their circus a success, but to make it a success against formidable odds.

It must be remembered that the fifteen boys possessed no ordinary ability in many lines. Four years of training as a company had brought out the best they had in them, and had given them a good capital of experience. Much credit belonged to Richard Denesmore, but the efforts and patience of the boys were, of course, of greater consequence. Richard had well-developed executive powers; but there were few in the company who could not have filled his position fairly well, at least. That was saying a great deal for the boys; for it meant that each one was quick to obey, and had learned to shoulder no small amount of responsibility. All were

self-reliant, prompt, and could be depended upon. But the crowning merit of the company was its ability to take hold of a thing and make the very most of it.

Of course, the company could not be absolutely perfect. It had faults, and some of them we shall have reason to see later on. For the present, although everything was not going the boys' way, still all was working in harmony so far as the company was concerned, and that in itself promised a great deal for the success of the undertaking.

The people of Quarry were not oblivious to the forthcoming circus, and the trouble the boys were having with regard to Waring & Wells' Consolidated Shows. They took an active pride and interest in the efforts of the organization; and it portended no small good for the boys that many said that "they guessed, if they had to choose between the two shows, they'd see what the Novelty Circus Company was up to." Yet, despite this

good-will, the outcome up to the morning of July second looked rather dubious.

At five o'clock on the morning set for the circus, Richard was at Ferndale Commons ready to begin the business of the day. Early as he was, he found the other members of the company there before him. All appeared to be in the best of spirits, seemingly unmindful of the fact that they were about to pit their circus against that of a powerful rival. Competing with professionals may have been a serious proposition, but the manner in which they went straight to work made it evident that they had determined to die game.

The preparations for the circus had been of the most thorough sort; nothing of importance had been neglected, even to smallest details. The committee on "tent and grounds" had found rather a difficult task in their attempt to secure a canvas that would hold from five to six hundred people; but at last obtained the rental of one from a city not

far from Quarry, and had it shipped to the town. Seats and other necessary paraphernalia had been manufactured by the boys without much trouble. As to grounds, the committee had made its choice early. The best location in Quarry had been secured; and Waring & Wells' Consolidated Shows was forced to take up with a cramped and inconvenient corner of Ferndale Commons.

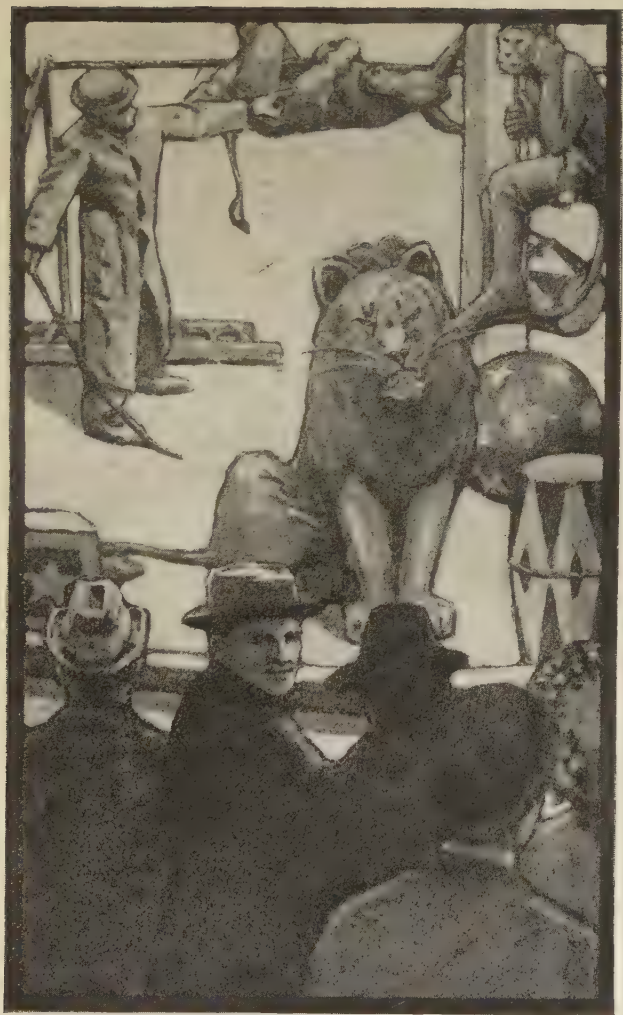
Richard did most of the directing of the work. He was everywhere at once, helping here a moment, lending a willing hand there, directing this and that, and at the same time doing a great deal of work himself. By seven o'clock the main tent was up, side-curtained, and the seats were in place. A small refreshment tent was staked near the entrance to the large tent. Later iced drinks and confections of various kinds were to be sold here. A dressing-tent was rigged up in the rear of the exhibition tent. Upon Richard's tour of inspection at ten minutes to nine, the greater part of the preparations for the circus

had been completed. The parade had been amply provided for, and would occur at ten o'clock. It was to tour the principal streets for about an hour; and from eleven, the hour scheduled for its return, until two in the afternoon, most of the boys would be free to rest.

A few minutes of nine, a weary and rather shabby-looking caravan, consisting of ten wagons, rattled up to the farther end of Ferndale Commons. It was Waring & Wells' Consolidated Shows; and the moment the members of the Novelty Circus Company had "sized up" the appearance of their rival, they took heart again.

Richard was resting, seated by himself on a barrel in the shade of the dressing-tent, when a big, burly fellow from the other circus strode up to him. One glance at the man was enough to determine his character. His features were coarse, and his dress was slouchy in the extreme.

"Well, sonny," he said, leering, "what



COREY HAD NOT SEEN A CIRCUS OF ANY KIND IN YEARS

sort of a campin'-out place you got here?"

"We're preparing to give a circus," answered Richard, shortly.

"Circus!" sneered the fellow. "Come off, sonny. Great kind of a circus you'd give. What you doin' here, anyway?"

Richard's wrath was rising already, but he choked it down.

"I just told you that we are here to give a circus. If you don't believe me, you can see our posters anywhere around town."

"Guess you didn't know we was comin' to-day, eh?" grinned the man, going on a new track.

"We were well aware of it," replied the president of the company, coolly.

"You might just as well pack up an' go home," continued the fellow from Waring & Wells' Shows, looking suspiciously about at the other fourteen boys, who were scattered in various parts of the grounds. "Nobody's goin' to come near you to-day. You'll

have t' wait 'til to-morrow," he added, laughing gruffly, as if he had made a clever joke.

"Our performances are coming off as advertised," said Richard, evenly. "We don't care to make you any trouble, but we mean to have our share of patronage."

"Oh, you don't want to make us any trouble, eh? Well, I guess we ain't worryin' over any fuss you kids'll make. Warin' & Wells want a little more ground to spread out on, that's all. Here's twenty-five dollars for your work in clearin' away all this rubbish. We'll be ready to take possession in half an hour."

"You may as well keep your money," returned Richard, looking at his watch. "We have paid for the rights of this part of the commons, and we intend to stay here."

The fellow's face grew white with anger. He had expected that the bait of twenty-five dollars would be quite tempting enough. But he was not going to lose the game.

“ See here, kid, you’re tryin’ the bluff, but it won’t go. I’ll raise it to forty dollars,—that’s more’n you fellows’ll see in a year. All I ask of you is to clear out of here in mighty quick order ! ”

Richard saw by his watch that it was nearly time for the parade, and he rose to his feet.

“ I’ve tried to make you understand that we’re going to give our show, and you can’t buy us up by a hundred or two hundred dollars. There’s no use in talking longer. Our parade comes off at ten, and I’ve no time to waste.”

Richard started decisively to walk away. The face of the fellow from the other circus had become positively ugly.

“ You little whelp ! ” he threatened with an oath, as he turned to go. “ You’ll see what comes of this before long ! ”

Richard hastened at once into the main tent where the parade was lining up. He knew that he had made an enemy of the fel-

low from Waring & Wells ; but there had been no help for it. He was not much afraid of any consequences which would follow, and he cared nothing at all for the man's threats ; still it was not a pleasant relation to establish.

" I couldn't help overhearing part of that fellow's remarks, Rich," exclaimed Ralph O'Leary, following Richard into the tent. " I don't like the prospect."

" Nonsense !" scoffed Richard with more assurance than he felt. " He is a bully and a coward. Such fellows are far from dangerous."

" I hope you're right, Rich," replied Ralph, shaking his head ominously. " He'd have scared me half out of my wits."

" If the people of Quarry knew how he threatened us," added Richard, " they would boycott Waring & Wells to a finish !"

Richard little thought that this last statement of his would cause trouble to the Novelty Circus Company. He was ignorant of

the fact that he had put an idea into Ralph's mind that was to work no little havoc; but he was soon to learn that Ralph's rashness in the interests of the company often went too far.

Main Street was packed when the "Human Animal" parade made its appearance. It was a wonderful parade from end to end. Eight floats drawn by horses and decorated in the most grotesque designs the boys could invent were occupied by a strange menagerie.

On the front vehicle, in poses as ludicrous as the boys could think of, were a grizzly bear, a lion, an orang-outang, and a clown. When the parade turned the corner into Main Street, this odd quartette struck up into a lively song. All four of the boys,—they were Edward Donough, Charles Eldridge, Harvey Coulter, and Harry Stover,—were good singers, and each could carry his part creditably; and this unexpected substitute for a band was so novel and entertaining that it "took" immediately. The other

floats were occupied respectively by a remarkably lifelike giraffe, a suspiciously active mule, a zebra, an elephant, and a camel. The seventh vehicle carried another clown, and the eighth and last conveyed two boys, not members of the company, who were dressed in scarlet uniforms and carried gilded spears. As the parade moved slowly along, they explained the various histories of the animals, evoking roars of laughter from the crowd. The boys appeared to be perfectly at home in their strange garbs, and the amazing things they did and said converted the throng of curious onlookers into a wild tumult of cheers and merriment.

If the Waring & Wells people had any great love for their finances while in Quarry, they must have been struck somewhat with astonishment and dismay. Here was something the like of which they had never before seen. It was so clever and original that there was no end to the possibilities of fun-making it offered. Long and earnest train-

ing had put the "Human Animals" in a position to act their parts easily and naturally. The whole affair was startling; and approval spread like wild-fire throughout Quarry.

So favorable a reception kept the parade out longer than it had anticipated staying; and it was half-past eleven before the floats returned to the tent. Richard shook all of the boys warmly by the hand, congratulating them on the success of their efforts.

"Old man," he said, when he came to Edward, "did you ever see a gold mine like the one we've discovered?"

"Never, by the great horn spoon!" responded the vice-president. "Wonder why we can't go on digging out the ore!"

Edward was still thinking that "something was going to turn up."

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER

As Richard came down the front walk from his home after dinner, a black speck hurrying toward him gave a shrill whistle which, interpreted into English, was an unmistakable command to wait.

“ Heard the latest ? ” gasped Edward, slackening his speed and puffing like a steam-engine from his long run. “ Or, rather, have you seen the latest ? ”

“ What’s up ? ” asked Richard, puzzled at his friend’s excited actions.

Edward pulled a small yellow bill from his pocket, and straightening out its folds, handed it to Richard. “ What do you think of it ? ” he questioned, watching the president’s face while he read. “ They’re scat-

tered pretty much all over town, I guess. At least, I saw them around on a good many porches on the way up here."

"When did you pick this up?" inquired Richard, looking hard at the handbill.

"Fifteen minutes ago. Any idea who got them out?"

There was but little printing on the sheet which Richard held, but the few words which it contained were quite sufficient for their purpose. They made it known briefly to the public that Waring & Wells had used threats against the Novelty Circus Company upon the latter's refusal to stop its circus for the day. Furthermore, the attention of the people of Quarry was called to the fact that the advertisement of "Human Animals" had been posted some time before that of the other circus. The circular was a direct appeal to all patrons or about-to-be patrons of the company.

"I'm sorry about this," said Richard, folding the bill. "I'm afraid it will cause a

very bitter feeling against us on the part of Waring & Wells, and may hurt the company in other ways. It certainly won't do any good."

"Do you know who did it?"

"I think I know pretty well, but I don't believe it's best to make any trouble about the matter. In fact, I'm not so sure but that I'm partly to blame myself."

"You!" said Edward, incredulously.

"This was the way of it, if it will clear up matters any for you. After the fellow from Waring & Wells went away this morning, I made the statement that, if the people of Quarry knew what threats had been made against us, they would boycott the other show to a finish. I never dreamed that any one would be so foolish and rash as to act on my words and send out a circular of this kind without the consent and approval of the company. In thinking it over afterward, I concluded that in all probability the fellow had no authority to talk as he

did. I can't believe that Waring & Wells' manager knew of the affair."

"I'm sure I don't know whether the circular is likely to cause trouble or not," remarked Edward; "but if it does, it seems to me that the fellow who did it ought to be punished in some way—put out of the company, perhaps."

"That would be going a little too far. It's always best to wait and see how things come out. The bills may do nothing more than stir up a small hornet's nest in Waring & Wells' show, and I may be mistaken in their doing that. But if the proposal had only been submitted to the company, they would never have been printed."

In Richard's private opinion, Ralph O'Leary and no one else had been responsible for the printing and circulating of the bills; and he was sorry that any member of the company should disregard its rules and take matters into his own hands. Ralph was a good fellow and an enthusiastic

worker, and Richard had always believed him to be well-principled ; though he knew that he was entirely too quick to draw conclusions, and was often led into deep water by his rashness. In the present instance, Ralph had been led astray evidently by his desire to make the company's venture a complete success. No doubt, he had not sought to break the rules intentionally, but had feared to risk the time which might be taken up, should he submit his idea for the approval of the other members.

This was the light in which Richard chose to look at the matter, and the subject was still in his mind when the two boys reached the circus grounds. He told Edward nothing of his real suspicions, because as he had said before, he did not think it wise to take any steps in the matter, at least, not for the present. If Ralph voluntarily confessed what he had done, all well and good ; if he did not, Richard felt no inclination to expose him. A private talk with Ralph at the

president's first opportunity would better accomplish his purpose.

A few minutes after one o'clock, the bear, lion, orang-outang, and clown went out on the float for a short circuit of the streets. The parade of Waring & Wells' circus, after the brilliant success of "Human Animals," had seemed rather tame and unsatisfactory. It was a very poor parade at best, and since it did not start until almost twelve o'clock, few people put themselves to any trouble to view it, and those who did were not much impressed. In the afternoon, however, the Waring & Wells' people were more prompt, and their band, such as it was, began to play on Main Street at one o'clock sharp. The "Human Animal" float simply passed up and down the business section of Quarry; the animals and clown sang two of their best songs on the corner farthest from the band; the orang-outang—Harvey Coulter—then made a profound bow to the crowd which had collected about the wagon and gave a brief speech;

and at the conclusion, the float commenced the return trip to the circus grounds.

Richard had gone in the morning parade dressed as a clown, but he did not take part in the circus, except in one act toward the close of the two-hour performance. His duty was to take full charge of the ticket-wagon, and to exercise a general supervision over the show. He was at his post of importance when the float appeared far down the street, coming slowly in the direction of the tents. Despite the fact that the financial success of the circus hung in the balance, he broke into a hearty laugh when he beheld, closely following the float, Waring & Wells' band. In the wake of these objects of interest stretched a black mass of people as far as eye could reach. Whether these people were coming to the professional or the amateur circus, it was impossible to determine. Five minutes more would tell.

All at once, Richard realized that the bulk of the crowd had freed itself from the band

and was following the float. A few stragglers, who could not break away from their desire to see the regulation acrobats and contortionists, turned in at the first white tent. But the greater number were pouring in a steady stream up to the place where Richard stood alert and ready to meet the demand for tickets. Richard could have shouted for joy. Here was more than evidence of the popularity of the Novelty Circus Company, and of the novelty of its circus.

For the next half-hour, the president's brain refused to work fast enough to dispose of those incessant demands for tickets. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred went in so many seconds, it seemed to him ; and still the people came. In the face of a rival circus on the same day, Richard had not dreamed of such a conquest. He even became a little fearful that the Novelty Circus Company would be mobbed by its opponent in the show line. When finally most of the throng had passed into the tent, and there

was a lull in the ticket buying, Richard took time to estimate the number of pasteboard slips sold. Their equivalent in bills and silver amounted to just one hundred and sixty-one dollars.

Several dollars more were added to this substantial sum before the flow of people came to an end. Richard put the money safely away, and hastened around to the dressing-tent. The circus had commenced some fifteen minutes before, and the laughter and applause in the main tent were becoming more and more pronounced. There could be no doubt that the boys' efforts were being appreciated, and that all was going well with the performers.

When Richard entered the dressing-tent, he found himself in a critical position. On one side of him were an evil-looking lion, a grizzly bear, and an undocile camel. To the right, a mule and a zebra were glaring at him savagely.

"Be kind, good beasts, and tell me what

you know of the grand entrée," said Richard, finding it hard to keep a sober face.

"It was a perfect success!" answered the giraffe, not always opening his mouth with each word.

"Magnificent!" echoed the lion in deep bass, rolling his fiery eyeballs.

Richard was confident that the opening feature of the circus had met with no mishap and had occurred on time, a test of individual responsibility which strengthened his faith in the boys. He could rely upon the faithful performance of their duties even when he was not around, and he believed that if any emergency should arise when quick decision would be necessary, every member of the company would use enough good judgment and level-headedness to carry him through.

"I wonder if the elephant is making some of his saucy speeches, Mr. Zebra?" asked the grizzly, as a roar of laughter and scattering applause came from the main tent.

"Sounds that way," said the zebra, which was waiting to go on.

"You're not all the zebra," grunted a voice from the animal's hind quarters.

Richard laughed as he stepped back from a hasty squint through the curtains dividing the two tents.

"Pretty hot in there, Stanley?" he queried.

A small trap-door in the zebra's side opened and a face peered out.

"Rather stuffy,—that's a fact!" said Stanley Carr, who constituted the rear end of the animal. "How long before the elephant and the mule come off?"

Richard stepped into the main tent, pretending to adjust a rope or two, but really to view the crowd and listen.

"They're nearly done now," he reported upon his return.

"Oh, I say!" begged the giraffe, working his mouth with the energy of a steel trap. "How much have we taken in?"

"How much?" chorused the animals, threateningly.

"Spare me, good creatures, and I will speak," observed Richard, retreating. "The figures are, I believe, something over one hundred and sixty-five dollars, not counting in the receipts from the refreshment stand which ——"

Several guttural expressions of astonishment interrupted.

"You don't mean that on the square?" demanded the lion, drawing an anxious claw about Richard's leg.

"Every word of it!" confirmed the president quietly but emphatically. "And the better you please the people this afternoon, the better chance we stand of duplicating that amount to-night."

At this moment, in response to the warning of a boy who kept a watch upon the progress of the circus and gave the word when each performer or set of performers had reached the finishing line of the act, the

zebra and the giraffe trotted into the main tent just as the elephant and the mule came off. The curtains dividing the two tents had barely closed over the latter two animals before both flew into sections, and the heads and shoulders of four perspiring boys came into view.

The animal "skins" were constructed, in the case of the large four-legged beasts, of light and flexible frames over which was stretched a very good imitation of the hide. These frames were supplied with numerous but practically invisible "sight and air" holes. Within the bodies of the elephant and mule, for instance, there was abundant room to manipulate all mechanical contrivances; nevertheless, on a hot day, such as this was a generous sample of, the space provided for the upper parts of the boys' bodies was far from commodious, and their positions were rather cramped. With a view to obtaining as much comfort as possible, they were dressed thinly, and the acts were made apprecia-

bly short, being so arranged that the animals did not have to go on twice in succession.

"The audience seems to be enjoying it immensely," said Richard, referring to the circus, as he lent a hand in ridding the boys of their strange disguises.

"You'd think so, if you'd been in our position," remarked Carl Dennison, fanning vigorously. "They can't seem to get enough."

"Good!" commented Richard. "How are you fellows standing it? I'm aching for my act to come on, so that I can take some of the strain off your shoulders."

"I'm sure you've been hard enough at it yourself," remarked Jesse Cartland, candidly. "I know a little what ticket-selling is, myself. Far as we're concerned, you needn't do any worrying. We're all enjoying it—you know that well enough."

Richard did know it. And when he stepped into the main tent and stayed to hear three acts, he could barely prevent

himself from tossing his cap into the air and applauding with the rest. Who said that the "Human Animals" were not enjoying their hard work? And, moreover, who dared to deny that each and every one of the members of the Novelty Circus Company was either born a perfect animal imitator or had mastered the art by constant and faithful training?

Five minutes in the main tent would have sufficed to convince the most skeptical that the boys had struck the right thing in the circus line, and had not only struck it, but were proceeding to make more out of their idea than older and less fanciful heads would have dreamed of.

The lion and camel, with the giraffe stalking between them, were on just as Richard stepped into the main tent for the second time.

"I'm sorry," apologized the clown—Robert Beebe—making an extravagantly mournful face to the audience, "but I shall have to confess that the human giraffe, the

most startling discovery known to the scientific world, was recently deprived of his power of speech. In other words, ladies and gentlemen, he is dumb. Last night a wonderful thing happened. He began to sing, although his song was entirely wordless. Of course, it is marvelous that this gift should come back to him, but I presume it is owing to"—here the clown referred very secretly to what appeared to be printed instructions—"owing to the length of his neck. Will you kindly favor us?" he begged, turning to the giraffe.

The giraffe shook his head solemnly.

"Excuse me; my throat is sore," he explained in very good English.

The avalanche of laughter that greeted this well-executed sally opened the way for a great deal of fun-making on the part of the animals, and the act went off admirably.

While the program was made up mostly of what the boys called "side-splitting

comedy," still there was no little serious performance of skill. The orang-outang whose garb permitted him to be more limber than the rest of the menagerie, and the clown also, each did some clever feats at juggling and trapeze work. The other animals stared at them incredulously, and tried to imitate. There were dialogues between the animals ; the boys' quartette sang ; and for more than two hours the audience forgot that there was such a thing as time, and unmindful of their hard seats, leaned forward, straining ears and eyes.

At the last, all the animals formed a semi-circle in the ring, and sang a farewell song. It ran something like this :

Who are the fairest maidens here ?

Oho ! Oho !

Who are the fairest maidens here ?

We'd like to know ;

We'd like to know ;

And if they'll kindly step this way,

Our appetites are good to-day ;

And every one of us will say :—

Yum—yum—yum !



THE CLOWN DID SOME CLEVER FEATS AT JUGGLING

And each made his most grotesque bow to the audience and ran off. The elephant was last to leave the tent, and he lumbered away as if his unwieldy bulk weighed three hundred tons. The crowd left the tent very slowly, as though unwilling to go.

“ Well, I declare, Uncle Will ! ” exclaimed Edward Donough, running to meet a tall, rather fine-looking gentleman who was making his way out of the throng toward the dressing-tent. “ Where on earth did you spring from ? ”

“ Rochester, New York ; came on the afternoon train. Found what you boys were up to, and walked in. Didn’t even have to pay admission,” laughed Mr. White, coming straight to the point in his characteristic way. He shook hands warmly with his nephew, asking several questions, and added : “ More about myself later, Edward. I want to see the manager of this circus.”

“ Richard’s about somewhere,” answered Edward, leading the way into the dressing-

tent. As they passed in, they almost collided with the president. "Mr. Denesmore, my uncle, Mr. White," introduced Edward. "Richard is president of the Novelty Circus Company, uncle."

"And its humblest worker," amended Richard, modestly.

"I want to congratulate you and every member of the company. Your work in many respects is up to professional standards," remarked Mr. White with a candor that sent the boys into the seventieth heaven of pride and delight. "I want to meet every one of you. Mr. President, will you please introduce the rest?"

And amid warm hand-clasps and more congratulations, each of the fifteen boys met Edward's uncle and liked and respected him from the first. He had that boyish good fellowship that pleases and wins friends wherever it is found, and the boys knew, the moment he began to speak, that he had an eye for business; and for some unknown

reason, they felt that it was going to benefit them. There was not one in the company who shook hands with him and looked into his face who did not hope that he might have the opportunity of knowing Mr. White better.'

"It looks to me," said the newcomer, "that you might have had double the number of people here this afternoon, if you had had room enough to accommodate them."

"Hardly double the number, I'm afraid," answered Richard, "though I don't doubt that we could have enticed a few more inside. We scarcely dared dream of filling the tent, after we found that Waring & Wells was to be our rival."

"You had little to fear," replied Mr. White with confidence. "I knew nothing of your circus, except what I gleaned from the posters on my way from the depot; but I would have discriminated at once in favor of you, if I had been a stranger; and I think the majority of circus-goers would have done

likewise. I don't mean to say," he added, smiling, "that the bill was perfect in attractiveness. But a little more expense and a little more detail would make it perfect. But I am getting ahead of my story. In fact, I have a business proposition to make to the company. First, however, I should like to speak with Edward and yourself, privately. You are the chief officers, I believe. Is there any place near by where we can be alone?"

"The ticket-wagon," suggested Richard, laughing.

"Good!" assented Mr. White. "Lead the way, will you? I'm rather a stickler for promptness in business enterprises."

The three went out of the tent, leaving the other members of the company excitedly discussing this new turn affairs had taken.

Edward's feeling that "something was going to turn up" seemed to be coming true.

CHAPTER V

A SALARIED CIRCUS

THE ticket-wagon was an immense wooden affair with a door opening on either side. It was the property of Mr. Eldridge, the father of one of the boys; and he had taken it in part payment of a debt from a man who formerly made his living by driving the vehicle around town, clanging a hoarse gong, and offering to sell anything from string-beans to cabbage heads. Just now, the side of the tent on which the wagon stood was shady. Had the sun been beating down upon it, quarters inside would not have been the most comfortable in the world.

"This isn't in the nature of a secret conclave by any means," said Mr. White, as the three climbed in and found seats near the

place where Richard had stood three hours before and sold tickets as fast as he could handle the money. "I simply wanted to have a little talk among ourselves before what I propose to do is made known to the members of your company."

He paused a moment, jotting down some figures on a pad he carried, and adding them quickly.

"You boys," he said, tapping the pad thoughtfully with his pencil when he had finished, "will want to go to college year after next."

"How did you know that?" demanded the two, almost simultaneously.

"There's just a possibility that I might have guessed it, isn't there?" asked Mr. White with an amused air. "It wouldn't be so difficult a matter. For instance, I know that Edward is to graduate next year from the Quarry High School, and it seems to me that I've heard somewhere that all of the members of the Novelty Circus Company

are in the same grade. I concluded very naturally that boys of your enterprise usually wanted to go to college—and usually went!”

“That has been my chief ambition for some time past,” confessed Richard. “It was not so very long ago, either, that Edward and I had a talk on the subject, and I think we agreed that we were going some way—no matter if we had to work to pay our expenses.”

“That’s the idea,” said Edward.

“What I’m after is this,” remarked Mr. White. “Do you know whether the rest of the boys are thinking of going?”

“Every one of them would, if they had the chance,” replied Edward.

“I’ve heard several of them say they intended to go to a university, and I’m pretty sure that Ralph O’Leary, Harry Stover, and Charles Eldridge will go,” said Richard. “Their parents are well off and perfectly able to send them anywhere they please to go. I believe the others would like to go,

but haven't much hope of getting enough money together."

"You think," questioned Mr. White slowly, "that the boys would be glad of the opportunity to pay their way through some school—say, for two years?"

"I'm certain of it," responded the president of the company, wondering what was in store for the boys, and feeling confident that it was something altogether pleasant.

"You needn't worry on that score, uncle," declared Edward. "Every fellow would jump at the chance."

"So far, so good!" said Mr. White. "Now then, I'm going to put a question to you boys. How would you like to take a six-week trip among the towns about here with 'Human Animals,' with every member of your company on a salary of a hundred dollars per week?"

"One hundred dollars a week?" gasped Richard, fearful that his ears had deceived him. "One hundred dollars a week? Why,

that would amount to enough for over two years at college. Certainly, you can't mean that!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the more credulous Edward, who already began to see visions of himself starting for his favorite university. "Of course he means it."

"I'm not joking—not a bit of it!" added Edward's uncle. "It's simply a business proposition, as you'll see after while, if all goes well. So far as I'm concerned, I don't want any money out of it myself. I'm not doing it for that; my reasons are altogether different, and I'll explain them to all of you later. What I want you to do now is to turn the matter carefully over in your mind until you can honestly decide whether you would care to undertake such a trip or not ——"

"My mind's as solid as a rock already!" interrupted Edward, who could scarcely contain his eagerness. "What's the use of all this preliminary?"

"It's of use to me," said Mr. White, "in finding out whether you really like the prospect of such a tour before I go into the business any further. I don't want any of you to set your hearts on it yet; it will be necessary first for me to persuade your parents that the trip will be worth a great deal to you, not only financially but in the healthy experience you'll get, and that you will be under my personal protection and authority. I don't anticipate any great difficulty in winning them over, but it is not well to say beforehand what the result will be. Another thing, extensive preparations will have to be made even for so small a circus. You can depend upon me to hurry matters along as fast as possible. Now, when can I see you again conveniently to-morrow morning? Is there anything to prevent you from coming over to Edward's home at half-past eight o'clock?" he queried, turning to Richard.

"I think not, sir. Nothing that I know of now."

“Very well, then,” said Mr. White in his crisp, decisive tones. “I shall expect you at that time. Meanwhile, you two had better talk with the other boys, telling them exactly what I have said. Personally, I can’t imagine that any of them will refuse to go; still, I may be mistaken, or something may occur to prevent them from taking up with the offer. I will say here that you will have to do no heavy work, such as handling the tents, though you’ll probably be willing to assist in the odd jobs around. But all these details can be attended to much better later. If my plans hold good, I believe it will be one of the jolliest trips you boys ever took.”

“I should say it will be jolly!” exclaimed Richard, enthusiastically. “It is something I never dared to dream of. I can’t make it seem possible yet. Really, it looks to me as though you were getting nothing, and we, everything.”

“Don’t let yourself worry about that,”

smiled Mr. White. "I'm willing you should have the money and the fun. But perhaps I'll get something out of it too. You'll find out my motives to-morrow, or rather, you'll find out the simplest reason in the world for my making this tour with you."

Mr. White glanced at his watch and rose.

"That's all for to-day," he added. "I must be going, as I have a lot of work before me. Remember, it's not a sure thing yet; but I'm going to do all in my power to make it sure, and I shall depend upon your coöperation."

"You'll have it, by the great horn spoon!" said Edward, using his favorite expression.

The three left the ticket-wagon, Mr. White to visit the parents of the boys whose names he had listed on a sheet of his pad, and Edward and Richard to hunt up the other members of the company and break the good news.

“Your uncle is certainly a wonderful man,” observed Richard, elated over the success of the interview.

“What do you think of my prophecy now?” demanded Edward, slapping Richard on the back in an ecstasy of delight. “Think of it, Rich,—a six weeks’ tour all over the country, and six times eighty-five—five hundred dollars and over in every fellow’s pocket. It’s more than enough to pay for two years at college.”

“When we get it,” amended Richard sagely. “Suppose he can’t get our parents to consent?”

“But he will!” declared Edward with great conviction. “Uncle Will never fails on that sort of thing when he once sets out to do it. Why, likely as not, he’ll have all our folks down on their knees imploring him to take us on the trip, before he gets through!”

Richard laughed heartily.

“I’ll not be able to sleep a wink to-night,

Ed," he confessed. "It's like having your ship come in."

It is hardly necessary to say that William White was a bachelor, but a jollier one is difficult to imagine. He had not been in Quarry since the time, five years before, when he had paid a flying visit to his sister's home, and then gone on to Rochester, New York, where he was to become the manager of a large wholesale furniture house. He was not a rich man, but he earned a good salary because he had the ability to throw his whole soul into anything and everything he undertook. His tirelessness and patience often went a long way toward attaining their objects when success seemed almost impossible.

When he stepped from the afternoon train at Quarry, with his first long leave of absence in four years, he intended to go straight to his sister's home, make her a week's visit, and go on farther west to see an old school friend living in Wisconsin, and renew their

boyhood days in a month's sport at hunting and fishing. The thing which changed his plans and made the fortunes, or the temporary fortunes, of fifteen healthy boys, was an innocent yellow show-bill which he paused to read on his way toward Main Street. It was one of the Novelty Circus Company's posters, and it aroused his curiosity immediately.

He was surprised to find, at a short distance from the first bill, a second and much more gorgeous poster which announced that Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows were to give two "magnificent" performances on the same date. Not stopping to read their extravagant head-lines, he hastened up the street, looking for a clew to the location of the show grounds. He was not long in coming upon the tents. Pausing scarcely long enough to spend an amused smile on the all too evident rivalry of the shows, he went into the tent of the Novelty Circus Company, finding a seat with difficulty.

This was almost an hour after the performance had begun.

From that time until the close of the circus, Mr. White forgot that he had come to Quarry to visit his sister, forgot that he had promised to go on into Wisconsin in another week to see his old chum and playmate, forgot everything except that he was looking, and listening, and enjoying. There was a time in the past—a time when he was a younger man by ten years—that he had traveled with a circus for a season, and that summer had been one for him to look back upon with pleasure, and re-live over and over again in imagination. Those were the days when circuses traveled by wagon and not by railroad. He recalled many a night that he had slept out under the stars with nothing but the fall of the horses' feet and the squeaking of the wagons to break the stillness. Each day had brought its work,—hard work, too, it was,—but as he looked back upon it now, never before nor since had he lived so

fully and vividly, eaten with a greater enjoyment, or slept sounder. A sudden longing came upon him to taste this wonderful life again,—not so much of its bitterness and hardship this time, but more of its freedom and luxury.

These were substantially the reasons he mentioned to Edward and Richard as explaining his part in the tour, and the boys were not a little surprised at them, so simple did they seem. They had presented themselves promptly at the appointed time, and had found him waiting for them.

“Well, boys,” he remarked, when they had taken seats, “I came out first-rate in convincing your fathers and mothers yesterday. Didn’t take me over ten minutes anywhere to drive my arguments home. Your company must have a pretty good standing, or I must be a pretty good persuader.”

“Mostly the latter, I guess,” laughed Richard.

“I used to live in Quarry a good many

years ago," said Mr. White, "and several—a good many in fact—know me. I promised very solemnly that each of you boys should have my individual care and protection, that we should suspend all work on Sundays and attend church in a body, and that I should send back semi-weekly reports of our whereabouts and safety."

"No wonder they consented!" grinned Edward. "They'll expect us to be millionaire angels when we get back."

"I've made out a short contract or agreement," proceeded Mr. White, opening his wallet and taking out a typewritten paper. "I'm going to read it through; you are to make any suggestions for improvement that you think of; and afterward, we shall want all the members of your company here to sign it. I haven't drawn up this agreement because I'm afraid you won't do your part; but if we are going at this matter in a business way, it is best that there should be a clear understanding between us. You will

want to know definitely what to expect of me, and I will want to know how far my authority is going to extend over you."

The paper was headed: "Agreement between the Novelty Circus Company and Mr. W. H. White" and was brief and to the point. It provided in the first place for a six-weeks' tour of the circus in the towns to be named by Mr. White. Each of the fifteen members of the company was to receive a weekly salary of one hundred dollars, payable at the end of the trip. Mr. White was to transact all the necessary business of the company, and bear all expenses contracted by the circus. He was to provide a cook and a sufficient number of men to do the heavy work of the show. Finally, he was to be liable for the company during the time which he should be its absolute head and manager.

In return, the boys were to perform their duties relative to the circus proper; were to give eleven performances each week, ex-

cept when otherwise arranged by Mr. White, or unless sickness and circumstances beyond their control prevented ; and were to submit to the wishes of Mr. White.

Furthermore, all money earned over and above expenses was to be divided equally among the boys,—or, as the agreement stated it, “was to apply share and share alike on each salary paid to the members of the company.”

“That doesn’t sound like a fair contract to you,” said Richard when Mr. White had finished reading. “You should have something for all your work.”

“And I’m getting something,” he smiled. “I’m getting just what I want—healthy recreation and enjoyment. I don’t want money. The tour with you boys will be worth several diamond mines to me.”

“Then I haven’t objections to offer,” added Richard. “But it sounds like a fairy tale to me yet. I’m afraid something will happen to spoil it all.”

Edward likewise judged that the agreement needed no corrections; and within the hour, every member of the Novelty Circus Company had heard the document read, approved of it thoroughly, and affixed his name under Mr. White's signature.

"We start one week from next Friday night," announced Mr. White when this had been completed. "I've made out a list of the places we shall show in, but I thought it would be much pleasanter for all of you, if I kept this part of the program to myself. The speculation upon our various destinations will add a spice to the trip that would be wanting if you understood beforehand just how it had been mapped out. That's all for to-day, boys. Thank you, very much, indeed."

"Three cheers for Manager White, fellows!" suggested Richard, and the boys "fell to" with a vigor that made the house ring.

"What in the world is going on!" ex-

claimed Mrs. Donough, looking in at the door. "One would think you boys had enough energy to have a good time and bring back several fortunes!"

"Three cheers for Mrs. Donough! Ready now!" laughed Richard.

And the boys gave them with such a good will that Mrs. Donough uncovered her ears when the deafening noise had ceased, and bowed a smiling appreciation.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST NIGHT OUT

THE afternoon performance of "Human Animals" had been an unlooked-for success. In the face of a rival professional circus, the company had succeeded in filling its tent, and the gross receipts ran to very nearly one hundred and seventy dollars. Richard was led to hope that the evening performance might double this sum; and his hopes gathered a great deal of encouragement when, at the close of the afternoon show, an old gentleman who was most kindly disposed toward the Novelty Circus Company, tapped the president on the shoulder, and said with one of his mysterious chuckles :

"Boy, the circus is all right! Shouldn't wonder if 'twould be a good thing to set three or four hundred chairs around in here.

'Twould make it a little less crowded to-night, I'm thinking."

The president of the company knew at once that "Cap'n Bob," as he was familiarly called, was neither joking nor trying to flatter him. It was merely the old fellow's way of dropping hints which wise people had learned to act upon. Knowing this, Richard did not hesitate to follow his advice. He rented three hundred chairs from a furniture establishment in Quarry, and in a half-hour they had been delivered, and the boys had placed them in position.

It was quite clear to Richard from what he had heard and seen that a majority, if not all, of the people who had attended the afternoon performance, were well pleased with the boys' efforts. Something which he did not know, and which would have gratified him exceedingly, was that a large number of their patrons had been kind enough to speak a good word for the circus. The likelihood of an exceptionally big attendance, for

the evening performance was becoming more and more assured.

The weather had been very warm, but clear and fine. When the sun set, the atmosphere cooled to a considerable extent and after the heat of the day, every one was in a better frame of mind to seek amusement. Long before eight o'clock, the float which had attracted the crowd of the afternoon to the show grounds, returned to the tent of the Novelty Circus Company, after a short concert on Main Street, with what seemed to be the entire population of Quarry following in its wake. Whether "Cap'n Bob" had been the agent in spreading the report that the boys had arranged for accommodating several hundreds more, was not known, but certain it was that the tent was packed until standing room was at a premium. The hand-bills which Ralph O'Leary had distributed might also have had much to do with this phenomenal throng. But this could be only supposition.

Richard had no time just then to speculate upon causes. Before him was the largest number of people he had ever attempted to handle. All of them were clamoring for tickets, and it taxed his ability to its utmost to keep up with the demand. Luckily, Mr. White was with him in the ticket-wagon. Two-thirds of the way through the ordeal, he saw that the boy was giving out, and at once took his place, insisting that Richard sit down in the rear of the vehicle and rest himself.

“ Well, Richard,” said Mr. White, a half-hour later, when together they had finished stacking silver and bills into piles of twenty dollars each, and were reckoning results, “ you have taken in just two hundred and fifty-nine dollars and fifty cents. Can you guess what I feel like doing ? ”

“ Not in the slightest,” exclaimed Richard, astonished and delighted at this cash outlay. “ I hope you’re not going to run off with the money ! ” he added in feigned alarm.

"Not I," replied Mr. White, laughing. "I was going to say I'd like to take you for a six-months' tour instead of cutting it down to as many weeks. I believe you're worth a small fortune."

"But this is our home town," gasped Richard who was afraid Mr. White's ideas were becoming extravagant and would involve him in bankruptcy. "The people know us here, but in other towns it will be different."

"You forget, my lad," remarked Mr. White with a tinge of reproof in his voice, "that I have been in the circus business before and understand a number of its ins and outs. A good many moves I make may seem the height of foolishness to you boys; but if you will wait and see how they come out, you may see differently than you do now."

Four hundred and twenty-two dollars and seventy-five cents is not bad for one day's work, even though fifteen boys train hard and

long to obtain it. That was the exact sum of money which the Novelty Circus Company had taken in receipts from their two performances and the refreshment stand. After deducting expenses, which were light, there was still a substantial amount left, and this the boys had already agreed to divide into three parts: A small percentage was to be used for making an addition to their library and for purchasing new scenery needed for Novelty Circus Hall; a still smaller amount was reserved to increase the fund for "running expenses"; and the rest was to be distributed among several poor and deserving families about the town.

Inasmuch as they had advertised to show on the following day, which was Wednesday it was decided that one more performance should be given on Wednesday evening. Richard, with Mr. White's approval, caused to be printed and circulated a large quantity of bills which made it known briefly that the company was about

to undertake an extensive tour, and that Wednesday night would be the farewell performance in Quarry, concluding by thanking the people very cordially for their patronage.

Several of the boys had spoken to Richard about the bills which had appeared on the first day of the show, stating that Waring & Wells had used threats against the Novelty Circus Company, and had demanded that it withdraw from the field at once. The president told them frankly that he knew pretty well who had gotten out the bills, but added that it was best to do nothing about the matter, unless the offense or a similar one was repeated. Richard did not wish to shield any one in the company, if he were really at fault; but he believed that a talk with Ralph would do much more good than to expose him and fine him for breaking the rules. Not long after this, he did have a private conversation with Ralph. Ralph admitted that he had done wrong,

but insisted upon the fact that the bills had made the great success of the circus possible.

"I wouldn't have done it, Rich," he confessed, "if I hadn't thought that it would help us and set us right before the people of Quarry. I knew the thing would have to be hustled, and I simply took the responsibility on my own shoulders. I think the bills helped us wonderfully."

"Granted that they did," said Richard, "very likely they did something else, too—stirred up a hornet's nest among the Waring & Wells people. It isn't always prudent to state truths about people in the way you did. And you can see that in a company like ours, if one has a license to do things on his own hook, every one has."

"I thought it was justifiable in this case, and I think so now ; but it may be it wasn't the right thing to do after all. I won't let it happen again." And the conversation came to an end.

Richard had feared that the bills might provoke their rival to some act of violence, but the boys were not molested further that day. There were some facts, however, which boded no good for the Novelty Circus Company, should it again thwart the plans of Waring & Wells. To these causes for grievance, the ill-timed handbills had added fresh aggravation. Not only had the other show people been forced to take up with a scant and inconvenient corner of Ferndale commons, but they had been worsted in every way by a "lot of youngsters," none of them out of their teens. As a crowning mark of disgrace, they had performed twice in succession to seats that were ridiculously bare and empty. Altogether, it was not an outcome likely to foster much good-will on the part of Waring & Wells, and it did not.

Thanks to Mr. White's enthusiasm and energy in his new undertaking, the preparations for the six-weeks' tour progressed at a rapid rate. He conferred with Richard about

the possibility of renting or buying for the trip the skins then in use. Richard wrote to his cousin and found that the company was welcome to them free of charge, provided they were returned in good condition at the end. Mr. White, however, insisted upon paying well for their hire, and did so. He had secured a tent capable of holding very nearly twelve hundred people; and he declared his intention of filling it, or coming close to filling it, at every performance. To do the heavy work connected with the handling of the tents, driving the wagons, and caring for the horses which would be needed to move their home on wheels, he had secured the services of five honest, good-natured, and able-bodied men, who were to travel with them. Thus, the burden of the mechanical part of the circus was lifted from the shoulders of the boys.

For six days during the week before the company was scheduled to leave, Mr. White disappeared. In the meantime, Richard

received a letter and a roll of specimen advertising. In the letter Mr. White stated that he was having excellent success in securing show grounds in advance and in getting out his advertising, and would be back in Quarry not later than the following Thursday. When Richard and the other members of the company took a peep at the posters, their eyes opened wide. Could it be possible that this was *their* "Human Animals" which was pictured so realistically and in such detail on the huge sheets? But there could be no doubt about it. Neither care nor expense bothered Edward's uncle when he chose to do a thing. With his whole heart and soul he threw himself into it. The show-bills were an example of the man, and it was all the boys could do to restrain themselves from gloating over their gorgeousness.

True to his word, Mr. White returned Thursday evening, looking remarkably fresh and bright after six days of what must have been hurried and incessant labor. His first

act was to call a meeting of the Novelty Circus Company. It was to be the last meeting before the start and as Mrs. Denesmore aptly expressed it, "You could not have kept a boy from it with a loaded revolver!" In fact, it had not been altogether easy for any member of the company to sleep or eat during the week. With the day of departure so near at hand, they had begun to worry lest some unforeseen circumstance should prevent the trip.

Their fears were somewhat allayed when they presented themselves at Novelty Circus Hall promptly at the appointed time, and found Mr. White there, confident and businesslike as usual.

"I wanted to have a little talk with you before we started out, boys," he said when all had found seats. "In the first place, you know we are going to combine two things in our little trip,—work and play; and with a little stretch of the imagination, we can make it all play. In fact, we want

to make it the jolliest and most wonderful trip we have ever taken. I can't say to you boys that there isn't going to be a sort of routine to it, and that this routine isn't going to get a bit tiresome sometimes—but not one of us is going to think of such a thing for a moment! We're going to see new places and new people. We're going to be out in the open air a great deal and we'll sleep like tops and eat like men and boys ought to eat. And have some adventures,—yes, boys, we're bound to have some adventures! And in addition to a good time, we're going to earn money, and the money is going to be yours because you've earned it and because you've earned it for the express purpose of going to college. Above all, we're going to unite in making the circus a grand success and in conducting it and ourselves in the best way we know. If any disputes or controversies come up among you members of the Novelty Circus Company, you should go immediately with them to

your president, and if he does not settle them, it is then time to come to me."

The boys had listened attentively to these remarks and liked them. Their first impression of Mr. White was fast coming to be a lasting one.

"I have made all arrangements for the circus during the first half of the tour," continued the new manager of the company; "the rest I can attend to later. As all of you doubtless have found out by this time, I have provided four light wagons and one heavy truck. The truck will do for the heavier part of the paraphernalia, such as poles, canvas, and so on. The wagons have been furnished with well-ventilated, removable, wooden tops, and each of these vehicles will accommodate roomy sleeping quarters for four persons. There will also be a small cook wagon, which will be attached to one of the wagons when on the road. I have engaged five honest, able-bodied men whom your parents entirely approve of, and they

will do all heavy work besides attending to the horses. Our cook I selected with considerable care, as I know we are all fond of first class boarding"—there was a cheer at this. "He says that he can handle the appetites of a party of twenty-one with ease, and we must not let him become too lazy, boys,—mark that!"

The boys laughed. They quite approved of this step, and each mentally avowed that he would make the artist of pots and pans regret his vain boasting.

"One thing more, boys, and I shall be done," added Mr. White, briskly. "We start to-morrow night,—or rather, I suppose I should say Saturday morning at four o'clock. My orders are positive for every one of you to go to bed early and stay there until half-past three. A half hour will allow you plenty of time to dress and bring your luggage down to this hall, where we shall start. Remember to report promptly at four. It will not do to be laggardly at the very begin-

ning of the tour, you know. Also, be sure you don't forget anything which you will want badly while you are gone. I've suggested several things in the clothing line which you will need to have for comfort. Keep a list of what you buy, and the amounts will be included in the general expenses. I shall appreciate any suggestions you may think of from time to time on any of these matters, so don't be backward about coming to me with them.

"I'm afraid my little speech has been rather chopped up," concluded Mr. White with an apologetic smile, "but I hope you have gotten something out of it. That is all—until Saturday morning."

To the members of the Novelty Circus Company, Friday night was provokingly slow in appearing, but it came finally. The mysterious ways in which Mr. White had provided in detail for their comfort had lent a magic touch to the excursion. When fifteen boys tried to forget the exciting events

which the next few weeks held for them, in sleep, they found it an impossibility. They were as wide-awake as if they had just enjoyed twelve hours of refreshing slumber. When three o'clock came, most of them could contain their impatience no longer.

Out of doors it was one of those soft summer nights when all the earth seems to be dreaming and intent upon being as blissful as the star-lined heavens above. Altogether, it was a most propitious time for beginning their tour as show-men, and the boys were in a mood to enjoy it fully. Long before the hour set, they appeared, laden down with baggage, in front of Novelty Circus Hall. Some half expected that no wagons would be there, and that the whole plan would fail at the last moment. But they had nothing to fear. The wagons and truck were in readiness, with the horses already in the harness. Mr. White was there, also. The drivers had not yet arrived ; they were more

practical than the boys, and were snatching all the sleep possible.

"Did you line up this caravan alone, Mr. White?" asked Charles Eldridge, wonderingly.

"I'm sorry I can't make myself out a fairy," replied that gentleman; "but I must confess that the men I hired packed the truck, and Mr. Hudson, the liveryman, drove that and the other vehicles around from the barn while I stayed here and kept guard."

Several times the boys had visited the enclosure adjoining the livery-barn, where the outfit had been kept during the fitting-up process, and they accepted this explanation as perfectly plausible.

"Your bunks will be good and comfortable, I hope," said Mr. White, as baggage was stowed away and the boys were assigned sleeping places. "You will soon find out that you can sleep like tops in them."

"Sleep! Who said anything about sleep?" demanded Robert Beebe, coming around to

the place where Mr. White was standing. "Couldn't sleep to-night if I had to!"

"Wait until to-morrow night," answered Mr. White, shaking his head sagely. "You will bless the man who invented bunks then!"

The five men and the cook were soon at the scene of these lively proceedings. There was no need of introductions, for the boys knew all of them, and inspired by the occasion, chanted an enthusiastic welcome to which the men were not slow in responding. Special tribute was paid the cook, and that dignitary replied with a good-natured smile and a low bow.

"Haven't forgotten anything, have you, boys?" inquired Mr. White for the last time, as the boys climbed into the wagons and the drivers took their places.

Receiving an assuring answer from all, he gave the word to start.

"Now then, lads, let's give Quarry a good, big yell in honor of the company,"

he suggested, as the men picked up the reins.

No second invitation was necessary and with a mighty burst of sound that startled Quarry into sudden wakefulness, the circus headed for its first destination.

“Rah ! rah ! rah ! rah !

N. C. C. N. C. C.

Zoo ! Zip ! Zim ! Zizz !

Nov-el-ty-Cir-cus-Com-pa-nee !

Rah ! rah ! rah ! rah !

N. C. C. N. C. C.

The greatest show on earth is ours !

Nov-el-ty-Cir-cus-Com-pa-nee !”

As the wagons began to roll slowly out of the town, the boys broke into a song so jolly and rollicking that those who were awakened from sweet, early morning slumbers grumbled, smiled, and went to sleep again musing on their younger days.

CHAPTER VII

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS

ROBERT BEEBE spoke the general sentiment when he said that there was no more sleep for him that night. Mr. White had made the move which was more or less responsible for this. By withholding the names of their various destinations from the boys, he had fired the interest they already felt with a greater curiosity and eagerness in coming events. The vagueness and uncertainty of what was about to happen spread an atmosphere of mystery over the excursion that was fascinating in itself. So far as going to bed was concerned, nothing at the present time was more distinctly unpopular.

The circus train had not proceeded far out of Quarry before the boys became speculative over their first stopping-place.

“Search me!” declared Edward Donough

when Robert Beebe began to question him on the point. "I can make a good guess at it—but so can you!"

"Now then, Mr. President," persisted Robert, turning to Richard who had been assigned to the same wagon, "we'll be very glad if you will clear up this matter."

"The spirit of your humble servant is willing," quoth Richard, poetically, "but alas! he is as much in the dark as your excellencies. What the Great Master hath withheld, he hath withheld from all."

"A very poor specimen of blank verse," replied Robert, sarcastically, "but it doesn't clear up the mystery that I can see."

"Better inquire of the driver of this royal chariot," suggested Edward, laconically.

"Hi—ho! I hadn't thought of that! A good and valuable hint, Mr. Donough, which shall be acted upon at once. Now then, Dan," said Robert, addressing the man who was driving, "we want to know whither this expedition is bound."

Dan Reynolds smiled broadly and good-naturedly, but he did not reply.

"You do not answer me," said Robert, after a moment's silence broken only by several chuckles in the vicinity of Dan's high seat. "Then in respect to my dignity, I must decline to ride with you farther."

Robert jumped to the ground, and began to trudge along the road, whistling merrily. Of course, his pretended wrath at Dan had been nothing but friendly banter. The real reason for which he had left the wagon was that riding was growing monotonous and tame, and the freedom of tramping out in Nature's mysterious gardens just before day-break was too great a temptation to be resisted.

Robert's example was followed very soon by all the boys. Mr. White had been interviewing the cook and arranging some matters of importance with him; but when he beheld the company, to a boy, following on foot in the wake of the show, he was not

long in joining them. A jolly party the sixteen of them made,—as free from care as the very woods and meadows about them, and Mr. White the jolliest of them all. Together, they watched the east flush pale pink, then crimson and finally, a great, fiery red that ushered in the day. And because the sun rose with unusual splendor, they hailed it as an omen of good. Softly they sang an old carol to the dawn which most of them had learned somewhere back in their earlier school-days.

An hour later, when they climbed gratefully back into the wagon, their destination for that day was known. Two forks of road, one of which would have brought them within a half-hour to East Haven, and the other after a longer time to Trenton, had been passed by and the wagons were headed straight on northward.

“One hour for breakfast at Deer Rapids!” chanted Richard, swinging himself aboard the plodding caravan.

Mr. White laughed. "Discovered at last!" he joked. "Well, Richard is right, boys. We breakfast very soon in Deer Rapids—not on venison, but on something so nearly its equal that it will stand you well in hand to make sure of your appetites."

The shout of approval this statement raised seemed to be directed mainly toward the cook wagon, and did not fail to impress its significance upon the expert in the culinary art.

Deer Rapids was a town of several thousand inhabitants, situated in the pleasant valley of the dashing, foaming, and altogether saucy little stream from which it took its name. The circus train was now approaching the outskirts of the place, and Mr. White took up his position in the leading wagon in order to direct the route to the grounds which he had leased for their occupancy. He was well acquainted with the towns, cities, and general geography of that part of the country, and his intimate knowledge now began to prove of no small value.

Early as the hour was—a little past six o'clock—a considerable portion of Deer Rapids was already astir, and the approach of the Novelty Circus Company was viewed from the vantage points of doors, windows, front porches, sidewalks, and back gardens. When the wagons reached the grounds, which were almost in the heart of the town, a crowd of small urchins was waiting to watch the proceedings of what they at once dubbed a “kid’s show!”

The boys scrambled to the ground with alacrity. They were alert for the business of the day, but they did not receive orders at once from Mr. White. He was deciding as to the most advantageous places for pitching the tents; and when he began to give directions, they were to the men and not to the company. It was with a curious feeling of being out-of-place that the boys realized suddenly that they belonged to the “actor” class, and were not expected to take a hand in heavy work.

Mr. White was not oblivious to their eagerness to doing something, and he soon remedied matters.

“Here, all of you,” he said when the five men had been instructed and were going about their tasks, “Reynolds and Crawford are going to put up the dining-tent, and a few of you might help the cook get the table in readiness. The rest of you can lend a hand with the horses, if you care to.”

The boys did care to, and went to work with such enthusiasm that the men complained there was nothing left for them to do, which came very near being literally true. Mr. White smiled when he saw results, and wondered how many mornings would pass before comfortable bunks would be preferred to the performance of the tasks to which the boys were now bending with a will.

Before many minutes had sped by, a fragrant aroma began to issue from the cook's cozy wagon where preparations for the first meal were advancing rapidly. The long

table in the roomy dining-tent had been set, and it was soon filled by fifteen very hungry-looking boys and six equally famished men. What a meal it was! And how intensely the boys enjoyed this first taste of their new life! For a half-hour or more, Jean, the cook, was kept running back and forth in a seemingly vain attempt to master those vigorous appetites.

"I should like to know how many pounds of meat our menagerie feels capable of devouring to-day," remarked Mr. White, as they finished eating.

"We will take care of everything in sight," laughed Harvey Coulter, purloining a last tempting fry of ham and eggs.

Mr. White rose. "That can be attended to at present," he smiled, "judging by our first meal together. But I'm glad to see you eat, boys, and you shall have all you can dispose of. Richard," he added, after an instant's thought, "I should like to see you a minute."

Richard followed him to one of the wagons. The men had begun the work of raising the main tent, and the boys were assisting them. The cook was busy clearing away breakfast. Everything seemed to be moving in the smoothest order possible.

"Try this on," invited Mr. White, producing a neat uniform and a cap lettered in gold "The Novelty Circus Company" to match.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the president, as he noted that there was a pile of the suits. "Are we all to have them?"

"Yes; they are for wear whenever you go down-town or about on the streets," Mr. White explained. "Have you forgotten that I had your measurements taken more than a week ago?"

"Well, it takes a quick thinker to keep track of all your doings," laughed Richard. "I remember about the measurements, but I didn't suppose that there could be results in so short a time."

"It's quite evident that you don't know me thoroughly yet," said Mr. White, amused. "How does the outfit suit you?"

Richard had slipped into the uniform while they were talking. It fitted him admirably, and was neat and showy without any suspicion of gaudiness about its make-up.

"I must say that your taste is O. K. in every particular," replied Richard, peering at himself in the mirror with which each wagon was provided.

"I want you to go to the post-office and inquire if there is any mail for me, for the men, or for any of the boys. There will be none to-day—at least, not for you; but you will be advertising the circus in a perfectly legitimate way, you know. I think that I will assign you the duty of daily mail-carrier, unless I send some one else occasionally, or go myself.

"All of you boys will be free to come and go as you please when it will not interfere in any way with your regular work. Of

course, if I find that you abuse the privilege, I shall have to curtail it. You can readily see why. I am responsible for the conduct and safety of each of you, individually; and I suppose you haven't forgotten the weekly reports I've promised to make. I don't believe a single one of you needs watching, and I hope you won't cause me to change my mind."

Richard felt not a little important, as he walked leisurely toward Main Street in Deer Rapids, but his feeling was one of pride for the company and not a personal display. He had no difficulty in locating the post-office. As he surmised, there was no mail either for Mr. White, or for any of the others, although he took time to inquire for each one with an assurance as great as if the company had been old in the business. During the interval, people stared at the boy in uniform, smiled, or commented among themselves. After leaving the office, Richard strolled about Main Street, taking care that

a good many persons should realize the significance of his uniform and the inscription on his cap.

Those who were at first inclined to believe that Richard was some boy in the neighborhood who had been hired to advertise the circus, were greatly astonished when seven or eight more of the boys appeared, each clad in the same costume, and each wearing an air of mature experience in his duties.

Richard was accosted on the street corner by a gentleman who was evidently much puzzled.

"See here, my boy," said he, "is it possible that 'Human Animals' is made up of you youngsters? Why, the Deer Rapids band was hired by a man,—White, I think, was his name."

"Band!" echoed the president of the company, in surprise. But he recovered himself almost immediately. "You're right, sir. Mr. White is the temporary manager of the Novelty Circus Company, but the

company is composed of fifteen boys like myself."

The stranger whistled. "I must say," he remarked, "that you appear like a remarkably energetic set of boys, or else you've got a fellow over you that's up to snuff."

"I can vouch for Mr. White," answered Richard, smiling. "By the way, are you in the Deer Rapids band?"

"I have that very great honor," said the stranger, humorously. "I believe," he added, looking at Richard closely, "that you are the Denesmore boy. Live in Quarry, don't you?"

"I do," replied Richard.

"And now that I think of it," observed the stranger, thoughtfully, "I believe I've heard of the Novelty Circus Company before. How did you get the idea of coming to this place?"

In the next half-hour, Richard and Mr. Harbeck, as his name proved to be, became so well acquainted that both forgot that the

minutes were speeding by rapidly. When the president discovered that it was considerably after nine o'clock, he took a hasty leave of Mr. Harbeck, and hastened back to the show grounds. He feared he had stayed on Main Street too long, although Mr. White had not specified any exact time for his return.

Upon his arrival at the tents, he found that the parade was already lining up. The movable tops of the wagons had been lifted off, and the bodies or boxes were extended ingeniously into broad floats. In addition, Mr. White had obtained three light drays; and a half-hour's work transformed the seven vehicles into wonderfully decorated floats. But the greatest surprise was still in store for the company.

Just before the parade was ready to leave the commons, Mr. White was driven up in a small trap, and took his place in the rear of the procession. He had with him hundreds of tiny balloons, red, white, and blue. They

were so weighted that when released they would sail not more than five and a half feet above the ground. What he intended to do with the playthings soon became apparent.

As the parade passed into Main Street with the band at its head, Mr. White began to release the balloons. To each of them were fastened several programs of the circus, —not yellow bills, printed in staring headlines, but folders of glazed paper illustrated by pictures of the boys and of the "Human Animals" reproduced from photographs, and with many of the details of the performance. The folders had been put out at considerable expense, and were souvenirs well worth keeping. The spectacle that the hundreds of balloons made as they trailed along in the wake of the floats, each with its burden of programs, was a sight as pretty as it was striking; and the national colors drew out a prolonged cheer.

Mr. White's scheme for weighting the

balloons now showed its value. Within five minutes after the parade had passed through the streets, not one of the tiny gas-balls was in sight. All had been captured, and were even then winning patrons for what the company modestly declared was the "greatest show on earth!"

The parade had been a complete success, and the time for the afternoon performance was awaited with a good deal of eagerness and some little trepidation on the part of the boys. For dinner, the cook seemed to have taxed his ingenuity to the highest, for the menu was something astonishing and tempting in the extreme. An hour's rest was indulged in, and at one-fifteen, the "animal" quartette sang on Main Street and was accompanied by the band, which had been paid generously by Mr. White to learn beforehand the songs which the boys used. The result of this high-class concert was to open the eyes of the marveling people of Deer Rapids still wider, and the crowd that flocked to the

circus grounds exceeded even Mr. White's high hopes.

"Richard, I shall need you to help me sort over this money," he called to the president, as the latter came up to the ticket-wagon, after seeing the show safely started in the tent.

Richard gasped when he caught sight of the piles of bills and silver. "Did the whole town turn out?" he managed to ask.

"No, but we'll fetch the rest of them to-night!" answered Mr. White, with his usual cheery confidence.

Richard was talking with Edward when the people left the tent. An unexpected thought made him jump suddenly and start rapidly for the ticket-wagon.

"What's up?" queried Edward, trotting after him.

"It just came to my mind," said Richard, in a low tone, "that there was a roll of bills amounting to a hundred and fifty dollars left in the wagon."

Edward whistled. "Sure?" he questioned.

Richard was climbing up into the wagon and did not answer him. Edward was about to follow his example, but paused on the steps of the vehicle. Something on the other side of the commons had attracted his attention.

Meantime, the president was searching high and low for the roll of bills. He was certain they had been left there by mistake, and gradually the conviction came over him that they had been taken. He recalled with a start that he had noticed Ralph O'Leary walking rapidly away from the wagon as he had climbed in. Could it be that Ralph had taken the money?

A shout from Edward called him to the door.

"By the great horn spoon, if there isn't Waring & Wells this minute! They're driving in on the other side of the commons."

Richard looked and beheld the familiarly shabby outfit of the rival circus establishing itself at the farther end of the grounds.

“Wouldn’t that beat you!” Edward went on. “What on earth do you suppose they’re doing in these parts? They’re not advertised for Deer Rapids. And coming at this time, too,—say, Rich, what’s the matter?”

Richard stood in the doorway, and his face was peculiarly white.

“The one hundred and fifty dollars is gone!” he said.

CHAPTER VIII

SELL OR QUIT

"GONE!" echoed Edward, wonderingly. "How do you know Uncle Will hasn't the money this instant? You say he took it down to the bank."

"Edward, I could swear that we forgot to pick up that roll! As I think of it now, it seems to me that the bunch—Mr. White had rolled the bills together and slipped a rubber band about them—~~was~~ pushed into that little depression in the counter." Richard pulled Edward over to the ticket-window and showed him the place he had spoken of.

"You may *think* you left it there," said Edward, "but it's ten to one that you didn't. I've often had that trick in imagination played on me; and every time I've been mortally positive that I did a certain thing, when in reality I had started to do it,

and changed my mind immediately afterward."

"I understand what you're getting at, but the feeling I've got now is different," remarked Richard who seemed very far from being reassured.

"You'll find you've had your scare all for nothing," persisted Edward, seeming to think that Richard's recollection on this point was deceiving him. "Suppose, if you want to, that the last you saw of the money was as it lay on the counter, pushed to one side,—isn't it plausible enough that Uncle Will took it up while you had your back turned?"

"I know you're aiming to be a lawyer, Ed; but all your cross-examining won't get me out of the idea that the one hundred and fifty dollars isn't in your uncle's possession at the present time."

"If it has been stolen," admitted the vice-president reluctantly, "it's probable that some one of the hundreds of people that have just left the tent took it. You're fool-

ish to worry, anyway. If it's gone, it isn't your fault necessarily."

Mr. White came up just then, heated from rapid walking. An unusual nervousness in his long stride and his serious face suggested to Richard that there was something wrong, and instinctively he linked that something with the disappearance of the one hundred and fifty dollars. Before Mr. White could speak, he blurted out the facts of the supposed theft.

"Well, that seems to clear up one point at least," said Mr. White. "I've been upbraiding myself all the way back from the bank for my carelessness. I was almost certain that I had lost the amount in some manner, though I hoped that there might be a chance of finding it in the wagon."

"I can't understand how both of you could overlook a roll of bills in that fashion," said Edward, frankly.

"I must blame myself for it," said Mr. White. "I'm old enough and have had suf-

ficient experience in the business to keep a sharper lookout than I did."

Part of this conversation had taken place in the ticket-wagon. The three had climbed in to make a thorough search for the bills, and Mr. White had shut the door, remarking that it would not be wise to spread the news any farther than it had already gone.

"Richard, you didn't discover that the money was gone until after the crowd left the tent, did you?" questioned Mr. White, when it was established beyond all doubt that the bills were not in the wagon.

"About five minutes after the circus was out, I think," replied Richard.

"It must have been longer than that," amended Edward. "Ten minutes, at least."

"Did either of you notice any one skulking about the wagon?"

Richard started to answer, and then hesitated.

"You should tell me what you know," advised Mr. White, noting his reluctance.

“Remember, this matter isn’t going beyond us three, unless it’s absolutely necessary. But I want this mystery, if it is a mystery, cleared up.”

“I saw one person about the wagon as I climbed in,” said Richard. “It was Ralph O’Leary, and he was walking rapidly away, or else passing by. I don’t think he has the slightest thing to do with the disappearance of the money.”

“I can’t think so, either,” added Mr. White, reflecting. “I will not believe that any of the company are connected with the affair unless I’m forced to. The fact that Ralph was around here at that time may look a little suspicious, but that proves nothing, and I can’t conceive that the boy would actually steal the money. Do you know anything against him, Richard?”

“No, sir. He’s sometimes a little rash, but that’s all.”

“Rash—how do you mean?”

Richard saw that he would be obliged to

explain this statement, and did so briefly, citing some little incidents that had happened earlier, though neither he nor Edward thought to mention the handbills which Ralph had gotten out.

“ I see,” said Mr. White. “ Now, then, I’m going to appoint ourselves a committee of three to keep our eyes open on this matter. I shall say nothing to Ralph at present. If the thing happens again, the culprit must be caught, whoever he is. I don’t mind the loss of the money, but I sincerely hope that it doesn’t implicate any of our boys. The matter is unfortunate, but there is little use worrying over it. Put it off from your minds as much as you can, and don’t let it spoil your good time. I think you can keep your eyes and ears open for clues without endangering your own enjoyment.”

“ So far as Ralph is concerned,” added Richard, suddenly, “ I had as good an opportunity to steal the money as he had. You see ——”

Mr. White interrupted him. "Pshaw!" he said. "I think I'll have better luck looking for my robber elsewhere."

Richard was grateful for this confidence in him, but he could not help considering that, under the circumstances, Edward's uncle was justified in suspecting him as well as Ralph. He knew he had not stolen the money; yet he reflected that he would have hard work to prove his innocence, should he be accused.

There were ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that some person or persons in the crowd which had poured from the tents a few minutes earlier, or some one of the six men traveling with the circus, had been responsible for the disappearance of the bills. Any unscrupulous individual might easily have gone into the ticket-wagon, discovered the one hundred and fifty dollars, and escaped with it undetected. Yet it was constantly occurring to the president's mind that he had seen Ralph O'Leary walking

rapidly away from one side of the wagon, just as he had entered on the other. He tried to convince himself that he was doing Ralph an injustice by connecting him in any way with the theft. It was inconceivable that a boy who was enjoying a salary of one hundred dollars a week would be so base as to turn about and steal from his benefactor. And still Ralph's presence there at that time looked queer.

As things stood, Richard could make nothing out of them. He wished heartily that he could have thrown the subject off his mind, but this he was unable to do, and he felt no inclination to follow the example of most of the boys, who had donned their uniforms soon after the circus was out and gone for a walk down-town. He did not have Edward's faculty of ridding his mind of disagreeable ideas, especially when he himself was concerned in them.

Taking a camp-chair from the dressing-tent, he seated himself in a shady quarter

where he was not likely to be disturbed, and fell to whittling a stick and thinking hard upon the recent turn of events. While he was thus engaged, he saw, coming across the commons, the same big, coarse fellow who had threatened the Novelty Circus Company at its first meeting with Waring & Wells.

The president felt in no mood to talk with him a second time, and his first impulse was to get out of the way. An instant's thought decided him otherwise. He determined to hold his ground, though he guessed well enough the other's errand.

"I see you fellows are trackin' us," insinuated the visitor who had noticed and recognized Richard from the opposite side of the commons.

Richard went on calmly shaving the stick.

"What would be the use?" he remarked, without looking up. "We wouldn't gain any patronage by it." He was fully resolved now to give the fellow as good as he sent.

“ You’re a pretty smart Rube, ain’t you ? ” queried the man, insultingly. “ You think you can follow us around eternally, an’ grow fat on it. I tell you the game’s played out ! ”

“ Speaking for your success in Deer Rapids, I guess it is.”

“ Take care how you insult me ! ” snarled the Waring & Wells’ emissary, his face flaming red with anger. “ You’re going to learn what it is to defy Warin’ & Wells’ Big Consolidated Shows. We’ll make you suffer for it ! ”

“ We have no intention of defying you ; still, if you persist in doing some more threatening, we haven’t any choice in the matter.”

“ You haven’t, eh ? ” sneered the man, who had intellect enough to catch the drift of Richard’s remark. “ Didn’t I warn you to steer clear of us—keep out from under our nose ! D’you think I was joshin’ ? ”

“ I think we have as much right here as

you. We advertised a week ahead, and have paid for all privileges. What your circus is doing here at present, without a single announcement of its coming, the Lord only knows! And so far as being bullied again by you,—well, I shall have to decline the honor!”

“It’s none of your business why we came! We was to have made Springfield up there, but the place’s quarantined, an’ we had to lay off here. D’you think we was goin’ to starve an’ give you fellows the field?”

“We’re certainly willing to let you get all the patronage you can.”

“Oh, you are, eh? Well, you needn’t kick if we take it all.”

“No, we shall not kick,” replied Richard, drily.

“See here, kid. You’ve struck a different proposition this time.”

“How so?”

“Your home town folks wanted to pa-

tronize you. It's different in this part of the country."

"We're willing to run the risk."

"You didn't have much of a crowd this afternoon."

"I think it was fair."

"What d'you take in?"

Richard understood that the man was pumping him for information. He was convinced, however, that the man knew more about the phenomenal success of the Novelty Circus Company at the afternoon performance than he cared to tell. Under these circumstances, Richard was willing to state facts.

"Our door receipts amounted to about three hundred dollars."

The fellow's eyes opened wide.

"Three hundred dollars—pish! Think you can stuff me?" But he looked as though he believed it. In fact, at that very moment he had reasons for believing that Richard told the truth, though what those

reasons were was not known to the president of the company.

"I'm simply telling you the facts," said Richard.

"Now, look here," added the fellow, in a tone meant to be conciliatory. "We owe you one for the dirty work you did at Quarry, but we'll let that go, if——"

"What dirty work?"

"I suppose you didn't have nothin' to do with printin' them bills," demanded the other, fishing one of Ralph's ill-fated circulars from his pocket, and thrusting it before Richard's face. "D'you call that doin' the fair thing?"

"It may have been fair enough, but I don't approve of it, and didn't at the time. The bills were gotten up by one of the boys without the consent of the company as a whole."

"That's a fish story! I know every one of you fellows worked hard to injure us. D'you s'pose Warin' & Wells'll stand for all this tommyrot?"

"They haven't hurt us yet," said Richard, sharply.

"Well, we can! You've done all you dare to make trouble for us and kick up a fuss, but we're magnanimous, an' we'll call it square if you'll do us a good turn now. If you'll travel with us,—your show, parade, an' all, as a part of our circus,—we'll make your fortunes!"

"I suppose you've got full authority to make this liberal offer?" suggested Richard.

"I make it as a representative of Warin' & Wells."

"Oh, I see. I thought possibly you might be Mr. Waring or Mr. Wells. What are your terms?"

He had his own ideas as to the fortunes which awaited the members of the Novelty Circus Company should they connect themselves with Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows.

"We'll make it a splendid thing for you."

"I think," said Richard, "that we can make more where we are."

"You won't go?"

"I think not."

The man's face was becoming ugly again. Obviously, he had counted on certain success this time. Richard wondered whether he knew of the existence of Mr. White, and wished the company's energetic manager would happen on the scene just at this moment.

"Then you'll quit, an' we'll see that you quit now! It's sell or quit!"

"I hope it's neither."

For an instant, Richard thought the fellow was going to strike him.

"You puppy!" he bellowed. "We can squeeze you and your show 'til you can't breathe, and we'll do it, too!"

"Richard!" called Mr. White's voice, sternly, as that gentleman came around the tent just as the fellow made off. He had heard the sound of angry words, and was

surprised that Richard should have been in conversation with the ruffian.

Richard wanted to vouchsafe an explanation of his conduct, but his pride was hurt at the evident displeasure in Mr. White's face, and he hesitated. Perhaps, by this time Mr. White thought him not only guilty of taking the one hundred and fifty dollars, but also of intriguing with a rival circus! Had he been questioned about the stranger, the affair would have been straightened out speedily; but Mr. White plunged at once into another matter, and Richard's opportunity was lost.

CHAPTER IX

A BIG ATTENDANCE

TIME and time again Richard reproached himself for not giving a full explanation of his disagreeable encounter with the fellow from Waring & Wells immediately after Mr. White had seen them together. Why he had not done so he could not have told, unless it was because of his feeling that perhaps Mr. White was already on the point of suspecting that there was something between him and the rival circus, and that this something might have a connection with the theft. Indeed, a sort of barrier seemed to have sprung up between him and Mr. White. Richard could not have defined it, but he had an uncomfortable feeling that there was such a barrier, and that it kept him from making known the real situation.

Ordinarily, he would have overcome this curious sensation and spoken candidly. Now he found himself unable to do so. He began to speculate as to whether or not the man who had threatened the Novelty Circus Company was really the head of Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows. He decided that it was impossible. An organization which traveled about as a circus season after season, even of a grade no higher than the boys' opponent, must needs have a more decent specimen of a man for manager. No doubt this man was a subordinate of some kind; though his "bullying" might be approved, perhaps instructed, by the real head.

At any rate, it was rather of a certainty, and a most reassuring one, that there was no likelihood of the Novelty Circus Company again meeting with Waring & Wells. Only the peculiar force of circumstances had made it possible on this occasion. Richard's mind seemed to grasp at this conclusion as an excuse for keeping silence. Some queer voice

within him reasoned that it was clearly unnecessary to burden Mr. White with the affair, since on the whole it amounted to nothing and would not be heard of in the future. Richard did not regard the fellow's threats seriously, for he had no idea that there was any intention on the part of the other show to carry them out.

As to the disappearance of the one hundred and fifty dollars, he was at a loss to find any tangible clew. He could have shaken the subject off his mind but for a thought that was continually recurring to him—in time, if the real thief were not discovered, might not both Ralph and he himself fall under suspicion? The very suggestion that he might be accused of stealing the money hurt him, as it always hurts those who are sensitive to the slightest doubt or mistrust in their good character.

Richard was innocent; and he wanted to believe that Ralph was innocent. In reality, it was ridiculous to say that Ralph had taken

the money on the ground that his presence near the ticket-wagon at the time the loss was discovered was conclusive proof of his guilt. The theft might have been explained theoretically a hundred times easier by attributing it to some unscrupulous person or persons in the crowd which had peured out of the tent at the close of the afternoon performance. And yet, Richard could not free his mind of Ralph, and how it should happen that he was walking away from the wagon apparently in great haste.

While he was debating first upon one of these questions and then upon the other, Edward, who had returned from town visibly refreshed by a lavish internal application of ice cream soda, pounced upon him.

“What under the sun are you mooning over, Rich?” demanded he. “Thought you were going to join the fellows down-town,—but here you are, solemn as an owl! You don’t mean to confess that you’re puzzling your brain over that money?”

"I was thinking partly about that and partly ——"

"Partly? What does the other partly have to do with it?"

"Well, the fellow from Waring & Wells has been here again."

"At his same old tricks?"

"Yes. He got a little more this time than he bargained for, I think. He had the impression that it was a sure thing this time. It was sell or quit! I didn't believe it was our policy to do either, and he went off mad as a hornet, yelling that Waring & Wells would now proceed to business and 'squeeze us until we couldn't breathe.'"

"He's a bluffer, but he's a wretch."

"I don't know about the first. Perhaps they can do something, though, after all, it isn't likely they will. Your uncle came around just as the fellow made off. I'm afraid, Ed, he thinks I've got something up my sleeve with the other circus."

"Don't believe it!—of course, he under-

stood the whole matter after you explained?"

"Well, you see," said Richard, "I didn't explain—that is, I couldn't!"

"Didn't? Couldn't?"

Richard's face reddened a little under Edward's surprised glance.

"I don't understand, Ed, what came over me," he said, "but there was something in his expression after he heard that fellow going it and saw that I had been talking with him,—it seemed to me that I couldn't speak a word. And he didn't ask me to explain. If he had done that, maybe——"

"See here," exclaimed Edward, "you're not yourself just at present, Rich. That's where the trouble is. What you want to do is to forget all about this confounded business,—sit on it if you can't do anything else! In the first place, the ruffian from across the commons—I've seen him—is a big bunch of bluff, and the rest of the Waring & Wells' outfit's like him. They

don't intend to do anything, they can't, and they won't! Furthermore, they won't take the trouble to cross our path again, I'll wager. They'll get enough of it this evening. If they get saucy before they leave here, I fancy Uncle Will wouldn't mind the chance to use a little persuasion on them."

"I see you've got your opinion in the matter," laughed Richard.

"You bet I have! And it isn't the only opinion I've got, either! The other's in regard to that money affair. Now, uncle knows that it's ridiculous to suspect any one in the company. If he has a particle of doubt on the subject, he'll soon drop it. Listen to me! Either the real thief will be found to be some one outside, or the company will be exonerated. In the next place, you are going to quit your foolishness. Uncle would as soon think that I am likely to steal his watch while he has his back turned as for you to take one hundred and fifty dollars that doesn't belong to you."

"If ice cream soda produces such hopeful reasoning, I ought to try it," observed Richard, amused at his friend's earnestness.

"Well, a munch at something or other will bring the same results, I guess," replied Richard's present counselor. "We'll go over to Jean's and coax him a bit."

Jean, whose superior skill in cookery had already compelled the admiration of every member of the Novelty Circus Company, cheerfully handed out a substantial lunch as a consequence of a little artful persuasion on the part of Edward, but remarked as a timely warning that dinner was not far distant. Dinner at noon and dinner at night were luxuries which, as Mr. White phrased it, "only circuses could enjoy."

While the boys ate, they discussed various items of interest which had happened during the day. Both declared that the morning parade could not have been more successful if it had flaunted the most gorgeous equipment in the world. As to Mr. White's sur-

prises, each was of the opinion that they had been surprises all around,—to the company and to the people of Deer Rapids. The illustrated programs of “Human Animals” seemed to arouse their greatest interest.

“It must have taken considerable money and brains to get those programs out,” said Richard.

“No doubt of it,” assented Edward; “but they’re helping us wonderfully. The scheme is worth while if it brings a few hundred more patrons every time than would come otherwise. That’s exactly what it did this afternoon, and is going to keep on doing.”

“Do you think we’ll have a larger crowd to-night than we did this afternoon?”

“You’re a little down on me for being a prophet all the time, I’m afraid,” smiled the vice-president, “but as you’ve put the question, I must predict an overflow of people,—a crowd so big that a tent double the size of ours wouldn’t hold them.”

"Maybe you'd advise an outdoor performance."

"I know you think I'm extravagant, but wait!"

"What if Waring & Wells don't take kindly to the idea, and proceed to 'squeeze' us?"

"Bosh!" vented Edward.

"Take it home, Ed. If you were managing Waring & Wells' circus, how would you like performing to empty seats?"

"I'd move, or have a circus that would draw trade away from the other fellow."

"Waring & Wells won't move for us, but they may make a move against us," added Richard, significantly.

"I can't see in what way."

"We've made a good deal of trouble for them—from their point of view."

"They weren't advertised for this place. In fact, they dropped in here just because the town they were scheduled to make was

quarantined. They haven't got as much right here as we have."

"They think they have more. I shouldn't be surprised if they put some of their threatening into action. Not that I'm frightened, but if the whole of their show is like the sample that's been over here, the landslide of patronage toward us will make them desperate."

"What can they do?"

Richard was unable to say just in what manner the threats of the fellow from Waring & Wells might be carried out. He did not know even that they would be carried out, although he was led to believe that the management of the rival circus was capable of resorting to questionable means of gaining their ends.

The conversation was dropped at this point; and after the evening performance was given without interruption from the other circus, Richard speedily dismissed the subject from his mind. Yet he was glad

when, late that night, the Waring & Wells people packed up and left Deer Rapids; for he was well aware that the multitude of people which had attended the evening exhibition of "Human Animals" and the few who had found their way into the tent of the other circus had added another thorn to prick the wrath of the rival show.

Richard himself had marveled at the throng which poured into the Novelty Circus Company's canvas that night.

"Goodness! Rich, there don't seem to be any end to them," commented Stanley Carr, staring hard at the people. "Where do all of them come from?"

"I think Mr. White is manufacturing them," laughed the president. "Anyway, it looks like it."

For the first time in the history of the company, people could not be accommodated and were turned away. Mr. White had managed his advertising schemes with considerable skill, and no one was more aston-

ished at the outcome than the company. Such an audience could not fail to spur them to their best, and almost continuous applause bore evidence that they did it.

Late that night, all the tents, except those in use, were taken down and packed. The following day, which was Sunday, was to be spent in Deer Rapids. The boys were up in time to do justice to a tempting breakfast and later attend church in a body with Mr. White. It is more than probable that Edward's uncle established a most welcome precedent, but one which, unfortunately, would not be followed, when he dropped into the basket a contribution which represented the company and represented it very generously indeed.

In the afternoon, after a dinner which the boys unanimously declared "the best yet," Mr. White gave a short talk in the dining-tent, and the boys found his remarks both interesting and helpful. The remainder of the day was devoted to strolls about town,



SUCH AN AUDIENCE COULD NOT FAIL TO SPUR THEM
TO THEIR BEST

letters home, or reading. Mr. White had brought with him a small but exceedingly well-selected library, and the members of the company were not slow in taking advantage of his kindness and foresight. Almost before they realized that the hours had gone, the cook was sending out a call for lunch.

"Well, boys," announced Mr. White, as they finished eating, "you have about two hours to take your last look at Deer Rapids for this trip. We start at nine o'clock, and will exhibit to-morrow at—the next place on the program!"

The manager of the Novelty Circus Company smiled as he added the last six words. The expressions on some of the boys' faces intimated that they expected he would forget himself and speak the name of their next destination.

CHAPTER X

THE SECOND OFFENSE

“BEHOLD the grand panorama of Corey!” exclaimed Edward in mock admiration, hugging his knees and gazing about upon the little town clustered in the foreground.

“Hush! not so loud,” warned Richard, laughing. “If your compliments reach the ears of that husky farmer passing yonder, he may take it into his head to come over here and give us a shaking.”

“But why on earth did Uncle Will persist in making this hamlet his half-way town between Prescott and some other place. Of course, it’s a nice, restful spot; but no, it seems he isn’t going to rest. Anyway, he’s ordered the big tent to go up. How he can expect to drum up a corporal’s guard here is more than I can imagine!”

"You've gone a little astray on your reasoning, that's all," said Richard. "Corey may be small, all right, but there are other things to be considered."

"What?"

"Well, for one thing, it's a trading centre for all the farmers within six or seven miles of here. I know that. In the second place, this is Saturday."

"By the great horn spoon!" declared Edward, jumping to his feet. "Then uncle isn't so far out of the way. All the country folks will drive in this afternoon."

"Exactly."

"I couldn't believe at first that 'Human Animals' stood a ghost of a show here."

"I think we have prospects of a pretty fair attendance."

"Wish I had your common-sense way of looking at things. I can't seem to get hold of any wisdom or reason either, unless it's through you," remarked Edward. "Here I was, ready to go back on my uncle's judg-

ment, before I knew what I was talking about."

"Is common horse sense such a great faculty?" laughed the president.

"Well, it opened my eyes in this case. I'm even curious to see this hamlet. Suppose we rig up in our uniforms and take a walk around. Uncle said we wouldn't give our parade until one o'clock, so we have nothing in particular on hand for a few hours."

"I'm willing."

The boys arose, and went to make the change in their dress, stopping on their way to ask Mr. White if they were needed during the morning, and receiving permission to absent themselves until noon, if they cared to.

Two weeks of circus life had sped by like a day. They were exciting weeks, crammed so full of events that Richard, who was keeping a diary of the trip, filled a small book with jottings upon what had occurred,

—the thousand and one little incidents that go to make up a tour such as the boys were experiencing for the first time in their lives.

Eleven towns in all had been visited thus far. Some were little more than villages; others were small cities; but everywhere “Human Animals” received an enthusiastic welcome. Indeed, in a few of the places where several of the boys were well acquainted or had relatives, receptions were given in honor of the company, and by means of these pleasant affairs the boys met a great many people whom it was a privilege to see and talk with, if only for a brief time.

In short, the company was enjoying itself more than it had anticipated. And so far as its president was concerned, he had almost forgotten that there was such a thing as Waring & Wells’ Big Consolidated Shows, and it had been a long time since he tried to fathom the disappearance of the one hundred and fifty dollars.

Mr. White seemed to maintain a cheerful

indifference toward the supposed theft, preferring no doubt to let the matter pass rather than mar the tour by working constantly upon the problem. Gradually, Richard began to follow his example, though he was still anxious that the company should be exonerated from all hand in the matter.

As to Waring & Wells, he had come to feel a kind of contempt for his previous fears. He was satisfied that there would be no more meetings with the circus, and that his second interview with the "ugly man" was to be his last.

At any rate, he had ceased to puzzle his head over these questions, and Edward, as the two boys walked up the street, could not fail to notice that he had regained his old light-heartedness and cheerfulness.

For a half-hour, the two boys strolled about leisurely, talking about this and that, and enjoying the curiosity and comment their uniforms occasioned among the villagers.

“BIG MONEY MADE BY SELLING ——” read Edward, from a conspicuous sign painted on the side of a barn near the outskirts of the town. “That reminds me,” he added, suddenly. “Rich, have you stopped to think of the pile of money we’ve taken in since we started out? I was figuring up a little while ago, and by the great horn spoon, I couldn’t believe the result at first. You remember what the agreement says?—that we’re to have everything over and above expenses. Why, it looks as if each one of us was going to have—what are you laughing at, Rich?”

“Nothing in particular,” replied Richard. “I was just wondering if you counted in all our expenses and deducted them from your estimate. First, there is a lump sum of fifteen hundred dollars a week paid out in salaries to the members of the company. Then there is the cook’s salary, the wages paid to the men, leasing grounds, provisions, keeping of horses, bands, advertising, and a good many other things I don’t think of

now. Besides these constant calls for money, there was the cost of hiring tents and wagons and horses, fitting up wagons, getting ——”

“Hold! Enough!” cried Edward. “I’m caught on my reasoning again, and I confess it. But all the same, I believe we’ve made something more than all our expenses combined, so far.”

“Possibly,” said Richard. “But you must remember that everything has been in our favor. Something may happen during the next four weeks. I’m not turning into a pessimist. I’m only saying that this condition of things may not last to the end of our trip. If ——”

Richard did not finish the sentence, for a large, good-natured man, who was mowing the lawn in front of the residence which the boys were passing, suddenly dropped the handle of the mower, and came out to meet them.

“Well, well, Edward, I hardly knew you!” he exclaimed, shaking hands with

the vice-president. "Have you joined the army?" he joked, inspecting Edward's uniform with a quizzical eye.

"Not yet, Mr. Hartzel," laughed Edward. "I'm simply a member of the Novelty Circus Company. There are fifteen of us in the company, and we're giving a circus here to-day. Mr. Hartzel, this is the president of the company, Mr. Denesmore," he added.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Denesmore," said Edward's friend. "I was wholly ignorant that there was a show of any kind in town. How did you happen to stray into Corey?"

Edward explained the point briefly.

"Well, well, if that isn't a scheme and a-half!" exclaimed Mr. Hartzel, admiringly. "Edward, you must come in and see us, and you too, Mr. Denesmore. Stay to dinner, and we'll hear more about this 'Human Animal' business."

The boys were not slow in accepting the invitation. They were not sure that they

could stay to dinner, but a note dispatched to Mr. White obtained permission ; and they did not leave the house until nearly time for the one o'clock parade.

“ It beats me,” declared Edward, as they hurried toward the show grounds, “ that I didn't remember the Hartzels lived in Corey. I'm beginning to think I'm a dunce. They're a nice family, though how on earth they came to settle down in such a place is beyond me ! ”

Mr. White had given himself modest credit for picking out Corey as the most advantageous place to break the long jaunt from Prescott to Springfield. He had counted upon leaving Prescott Friday after the evening performance, arriving at Corey early Saturday morning. Starting again from Corey late Saturday afternoon, and so reaching Springfield in time to spend Sunday and exhibit there on the next day. He had been fortunate in planning to strike Corey on a Saturday, as at this time its population of

seven or eight hundred would be swelled by the farmers and their families in the vicinity who drove in to do their weekly trading. Corey had not seen a circus of any kind in years, and this fact was also in the company's favor.

Mr. White did not expect a large attendance, but he got more than he had expected. He found the people in just the right mood. Ordinarily, Coreyites were inclined to view the dollar as something which must be used with the most scrupulous economy. But when they chose to spend money, they spent like kings and this was a day when they chose to be kings.

"Well, I'll be dashed!" Edward burst out, joining Richard in the dressing-tent after the performance. "Did you ever see anything like the luck we're having? Now the crowd here this afternoon was made up of the stingiest old fellows in the country, and yet they handed out their quarters as meek as you please!"

"I see. You're just beginning to appreciate your uncle," said Richard.

"Your withering sarcasm is—— Hello! I wonder if this is surprise number two," added Edward, as he looked out from a flap of canvas. "On my word, it's our old friend, Waring & Wells!"

"What?"

"Just as sure as I live!" repeated the vice-president, holding the side curtain down for Richard to get a glimpse of the wagons driving in at the farther side of the commons. "Rich, you look scared."

"I can't imagine what they're here for."

"I can. Probably doing the same stunt we are,—making this their half-way place."

"What if they are going to *our* destination?" demanded Richard, anxiously.

"If they are, I guess we'll have to let them go—and suffer the consequences!" replied Edward, coolly. "Let's walk over and find out what Uncle Will thinks about it."

By this time the boys had removed their

“animal” costumes, and slipped into more conventional attire. Mr. White was very likely to be found in the ticket-wagon, and they passed out of the dressing-tent in that direction.

The ticket-wagon was stationed a few yards from the main entrance to the big tent, between it and the dining-tent. The ticket “window” was at the back of the wagon, and here Mr. White took up his position before each performance. He usually counted the receipts immediately after the sale of tickets came to an end, and afterward deposited the money in the bank.

A large barrel stood in the shade of the dining-tent very near the wagon. Ralph O’Leary had perched himself upon it, and was reading a book from the library which Mr. White had thoughtfully provided for the company’s use. Richard stopped a minute to speak with him, while Edward walked around to the other side of the vehicle, and called his uncle to the little

door which opened in the centre. After a time, Richard came up, and the three stood talking. Mr. White was in the doorway of the vehicle, and the two boys were leaning against the side.

Suddenly, Mr. White looked down at the bills he held in his hands, felt anxiously in all his pockets, and hurried back to the ticket-window. His face was very grave when he returned to the door.

"What under the sun is the matter?" questioned his nephew.

"I left a roll of bills amounting to two hundred dollars on the counter of the window when you called me," said Mr. White, slowly. "I thought I had slipped the bunch in my pocket, but it seems I did not. The bills are gone!"

"Two hundred dollars stolen!" gasped Richard in dismay. "Who could have taken the money?"

"That's what I should very much like to know," said Mr. White, sternly.

"I was around by the window myself just a minute ago," continued the president. "There was no one in sight then but Ralph, and he was sitting on a barrel reading. I'll ask him about it."

Richard darted about the wagon, but came back almost instantly. His face was pale.

"Ralph is gone," he said.

CHAPTER XI

RALPH DISAPPEARS

RICHARD and Edward looked at Mr. White and Mr. White looked at them, each unwilling to believe that Ralph's sudden departure had anything to do with the loss of the two hundred dollars. Yet it was evident that Ralph and Richard were the only persons who could possibly have had an opportunity to reach within the ticket-window and remove the bills. And now Ralph was gone.

"There is one thing certain," said Richard, breaking the silence at last. "If you are going to suspect Ralph of stealing the money, then you must suspect me. I had exactly the same chance to take the money, while I was talking to him, that he did. I never dreamed that the bills were there, and I don't believe Ralph did, either."

"I am a great deal to blame, myself," said Mr. White, generously. "This thing would never have happened, if I had not been inexcusably careless. Nevertheless, we can't get around the fact that it has happened. I don't like to credit the idea that there is a thief in our very midst, but I must say that circumstances rather point in that direction. This is the second time that a large amount of money has been taken from the wagon."

"Are you positive that you haven't mislaid the bills, or that they have not fallen out of sight somewhere?" asked the president of the company, desperately.

"I wish that it were possible to account for their disappearance in some such way," answered Mr. White, gravely, "but there can be no doubt that I left them lying on the counter. Edward was shouting at me to come to the door; it startled me, and instead of slipping the roll into my coat pocket, as I fully intended doing, I left it lying within easy reach of any one who might be passing."

"We had been talking—all three of us—about ten or twelve minutes before you discovered the bills were gone," put in Edward. "Ralph may have gone soon after we began our conversation, and some other fellow slipped up and got away with the money."

"What puzzles me," said his uncle, "is how a boy, or any person for that matter, could have known that the bills were there, unless he passed directly in front of the window and looked in."

"I came directly by the window, though I didn't see the bills, and never dreamed of their being there," added Richard, quickly. "I'll tell you how it was, Mr. White. Ed and I had come up to the wagon to speak to you, and I saw Ralph sitting on that barrel over there by the dining-tent, reading a book. Ed walked on toward the wagon, and I stopped a minute or so to ask Ralph how he accounted for Waring & Wells' coming to Corey. Then I came around the wagon to this spot, and have been here ever since."

"And you saw no other persons about?" questioned Mr. White.

"I can't remember noticing a soul," said Richard.

"Nor I," answered the vice-president.

"It's strange. This is the second time a large sum of money has come up missing. Who the thief is, and how he has his business down so pat that he doesn't leave any traces, seems to be an enigma. It's hard to think that the thing can be done in broad daylight and under our very noses. In all fairness, I must say that it looks a little bad for Ralph, as matters now stand. At the time of the first theft, Richard sees him walking rapidly away from the ticket-wagon; and now he disappears at the same time that the money apparently takes wings."

"I don't see why you are leaving me out of the question," declared Richard. "If Ralph is to be suspected, I'm in about the same position."

"I think I know you thoroughly,

Richard," said Mr. White with emphasis. "I have my reasons for believing that you are incapable of stealing, even if tempted by a roll of two hundred dollars. Ralph, I do not know so well, and while I am not inclined to doubt his honesty, still his peculiar connection with both these affairs seems to require an explanation. I took no steps to discover and punish the culprit in the first instance because I was rather of the opinion that the guilty person was not among our number. But this second offense is going a trifle too far."

"I'm sure Ralph is innocent," persisted Richard.

"You say you are sure?"

"That is," explained the president, "I've known him ever since we've been old enough to play together, and I can't believe he would do such a thing. He may be rash and too quick to jump at conclusions, but when it comes to taking two hundred dollars from a man who is paying him a salary of one

hundred dollars a week,—well, I don't believe it! I know that I thought it was strange, in the first case, that he should be walking away from the ticket-wagon just at that time, but I'm almost confident now that he had nothing to do with any of it."

"I'm glad that he has such a staunch friend, at least," remarked Mr. White, "and I earnestly hope you are right. However, I feel it's my duty to probe this unfortunate occurrence to the bottom. I shall see and talk with Ralph privately first. I think I can readily ascertain his guilt or innocence. If he knows nothing about the matter, I shall call a meeting of every one associated with the circus, and try to dig out some kind of a clew.

"As for the present, you boys are to say nothing about the matter. Don't worry about it, either. Worry never helps, and everything is bound to come out right in the end. I'm not going to think any one connected with the circus is a thief, until it is proven beyond all doubt."

“Are you going to talk with Ralph at once?” asked Richard.

“The sooner I see him the better. I should like to get this unpleasant business over with as soon as possible.”

Mr. White was reluctant to accuse Ralph of the theft; but he was determined to clear up the mystery, and the first step clearly lay in this direction. It seemed that the cloud of suspicion which hung over Ralph was destined to thicken even more. Twenty minutes' diligent search and inquiry proved that he was not on the circus grounds.

When Richard left Ralph and walked around to the other side of the ticket-wagon, where Edward and his uncle were discussing the arrival of Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows, Ralph was finishing the last chapter of an absorbing book which he had drawn from the “circus” library. He read the last word, closed the book, and stretched himself sleepily. For a minute or two he listened to the voices on the other

side of the ticket-wagon. Then he got up and passed through the dining-tent, now deserted, and on to the wagon in which the library was kept. After replacing the volume, he strolled over to the tent where the horses were quartered, and paid the faithful animals a brief visit.

Noting by his watch that it was only half-past four, he decided to put on his uniform and walk up town. Carl and Stanley had left the grounds directly after the afternoon performance, and Ralph thought to run across them. He walked about the village for awhile without finding either of them, and at last gave it up and returned to the tents.

It was about five o'clock when he neared the north end of the commons where the wagons of Waring & Wells were standing. It was evident that the circus had no intentions of exhibiting in Corey, for even then men were at work harnessing the horses, preparatory to departure.

A little curious to see the other show

closer, Ralph walked around its temporary encampment, trying to get a glimpse of the interiors of the wagons. As he passed the last vehicle, a burly fellow, seated in the doorway, hailed him. It was the same man who had threatened the president of the Novelty Circus Company on two occasions. Ralph recognized him at once, and wondered at his apparent good-nature.

“ Well, boy, how’s your ‘ Human Animals ’ comin’ ? ” he grinned, amiably.

“ Pretty fair,” replied Ralph, shortly.

“ What animal are you, anyway ? ” queried the fellow with sudden interest.

“ Part of the zebra—the front part ! ” said Ralph, laughing a little.

“ Your show’s quite a novelty, ain’t it ? ” continued the Waring & Wells *attaché*, lighting a cigarette.

“ It seems to take pretty well.”

At this point two or three men came up with a team of horses, and began to harness them rapidly to the wagon.

"Say, young fellow, step inside, an' see how Warin' & Wells live," invited Ralph's questioner, unexpectedly, as he slowly got to his feet.

Ralph hesitated, but he saw no harm in taking a peep within the wagon and followed the man up the steps. Inside it was stuffy and odorous, for every window and ventilator seemed to be shut tight.

"I'll close up an' light the lamp," continued the fellow. "You can see better how it looks then."

Ralph was at once disgusted with himself for having accepted the offer. With the door shut, and a swinging kerosene lamp lighted, it was so hot that he almost gasped for breath.

"I'll open up in a minute," promised the man. "It is pretty hot in here. I just wanted to give you a good look around."

Ralph glanced about the place, but the general disorder did not impress him very favorably, and he was impatient to get out

of the stifling atmosphere. He was startled when the wagon began to move slowly across the commons.

"We drive down past your tents," was the gruff reassurance of the other. "You might as well ride as walk. You see, we've been showin' at Chesterfield, an' we want to make a place about forty miles up the line next, so we laid off here and let the horses rest up."

"I wish you'd let in some fresh air," Ralph burst out at this instant. The boy was bathed in perspiration. "It's terrible!"

"Guess that's right," said the fellow, rising as if to make good his previous words. "By the way, how'd you like to travel with Warin' & Wells on a nice little salary, an' do your animal tricks, an' so on? You've struck a novelty in that line, certain."

"I'm not after a bigger salary than I'm getting now," answered Ralph, not relishing the fellow's way of joking, as he thought. "Guess we must be almost to the south end

of the commons," he added, walking toward the door.

But the fellow was directly in his way, and his manner had changed entirely.

"You can't get out, young fellow. I've decided I need you in our circus. We'll make you a good thing out of it. Guess we can rig up some kind of a skin for you to perform in."

"Let me out!" demanded Ralph, indignantly.

"If you don't shut up mighty quick, I'll shut you up!" threatened the fellow, with brutal significance. "You're going along with us for a few months, an' you might as well make up your mind to it. I don't want to gag you, seein' it's so hot in here, but you'll have to keep quiet 'til we get out of Corey. Then you can screech all you want to. Likely the farmers'll think we've got a young hyeny in here!" And the man chuckled coarsely.

Ralph's first impulse was to leap at him

and try to get out of the door. But he was no match for the wretch. It was plain now why the wagon had been closed so tightly. He had been caught very neatly. Obviously, his kidnapper had thought that his absence would effectually cripple the company, perhaps prevent it from exhibiting at all.

Ralph wished that he knew where Waring & Wells were bound, but no satisfaction was to be gained from his captor. Worst of all, he was ignorant of the name of the town for which the Novelty Circus Company would leave that night. He thought of the consternation of Mr. White and the boys when it should be discovered that he was gone. Had he known that he was suspected of stealing two hundred dollars—possibly, three hundred and fifty dollars—his misery would have been complete.

CHAPTER XII

A TRICK OF THE ENEMY

“AT Corey?” interrupted Mrs. Dennison.
“Where is Corey?”

The mothers of the fifteen boys who composed the Novelty Circus Company were assembled at the home of Mrs. Donough for the pleasant diversion of listening to one of Mr. White’s bi-weekly letters. Mrs. Donough was reading, and had come to a point where her brother was narrating the details of the company’s trip from Prescott to the little village where Edward had thought at first “they wouldn’t be able to drum up a corporal’s guard!”

“Will says a little farther along that Corey is a ‘four-corners’ about fifteen miles south of Prescott,” explained Mrs. Donough, looking up from the closely-written sheets in her hand. “I guess it’s hardly large enough to

put on the map," she laughed, "but he thought it would do to break the trip between Prescott and Springfield."

"Prescott is nearly seven thousand, is it not, Mrs. Coulter?" questioned Mrs. Carr. "I think you have spoken of visiting friends there."

"About nine thousand, if I remember rightly. I haven't been there in years, though, and it may have grown."

"Now that we've found Corey's location, I'm getting anxious to hear the rest," suggested Mrs. Beebe.

"Let me see, I left off—oh, yes!" Mrs. Donough found the place quickly, and read on:

"We arrived at Corey in the neighborhood of six o'clock Saturday morning. For the benefit of those who never heard of the place, I will explain that it is a 'four-corners' situated about fifteen miles south of Prescott. I was in a quandary at first as to how I should break the trip from Prescott

to Springfield, our next destination. It seems strange, but it's a fact, that for a radius of, say, twelve miles, this particular locality has only two or three towns and they are of the Corey type. I was lucky in striking here on a Saturday, as the farmers and their families drive in to do their weekly trading, and they swell the population considerably. However, I don't expect to have any kind of a crowd for the one performance we shall give. In fact, my purpose is to make Corey a sort of half-way spot, rather than anything else.

"I have written an exceptionally long letter this time, so will end it here, and take up the thread of our adventures in my next. I suppose you are asking where the adventures come in. Well, we're having a certain kind of adventure right along,—every-day adventure, you understand. As for startling happenings, there is time enough for them in the four solid weeks ahead of us——"

"According to Robert's letter, they've

been having a few already," put in Mrs. Beebe. "But finish Mr. White's letter, Mrs. Donough, and I'll read Robert's account later."

Mrs. Donough resumed her reading.

"All of the boys are getting along nicely, and as they are continually telling me, are having 'the time of their lives!' I presume, however, you are well aware of that fact from their letters home.

"Financially, we are doing exceedingly well. Our success has been far above my expectations. I hope our good luck will continue, as it will mean a very pleasant surprise for the boys at the end.

"Trusting you are all as well and happy as we are,

"Believe me,

"Very sincerely yours,

"WILLIAM WHITE."

Mr. White had mentioned nothing in his letters concerning the disappearance of the

one hundred and fifty dollars, and he had cautioned Richard and Edward, who shared in the knowledge of the theft, not to speak of the matter when they wrote home. He realized that the bare announcement of the episode would cause no little worry among the boys' parents in Quarry; and if he were obliged to tell part of the truth, it might become necessary to make known circumstances that would reflect upon the honesty of certain individuals in the Novelty Circus Company.

"I think the boys are in splendid hands," remarked Mrs. Dennison, as Mrs. Donough folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope. "I, for one, am perfectly satisfied."

"A man who can write a letter like that always impresses me as one that is cheery and good-natured under all conditions," said Mrs. Stover, a little woman with pink cheeks and bright, earnest eyes. "If I had never seen your brother, Mrs. Donough, I should

feel that my boy was perfectly safe with him, whatever happens."

"I don't think your confidence is at all misplaced," said Mrs. Dennison.

"Speaking of being good-natured and cheerful at all times," remarked Mrs. Cartland, "reminds me that Mrs. Beebe said that Robert mentioned something which Mr. White had not reported."

"It's nothing to be alarmed over," explained Mrs. Beebe, smiling. "Mr. White hasn't spoken of it, as I don't think it has come to his ears. This is what Robert says :

" ' Mother, you remember Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows that exhibited in Quarry on the day of our show? Well, I don't know whether you knew or not that a big, hulking fellow from their circus marched over to Richard before our afternoon performance and threatened that it would be the worse for the Novelty Circus Company, if it didn't vacate the premises at once.

Rich had his wits with him, as he always does, and the man finally left, vowing that Waring & Wells would proceed to raise a row.

“ ‘ Well, when we got to Deer Rapids, the first place on our trip, what should we stumble up against but the same old Waring & Wells. It seemed that they had been advertised for a town somewhere on the line which was quarantined, so they dropped down on Deer Rapids where they weren't scheduled to exhibit at all. Along about half-past four in the afternoon, while Mr. White and most of the boys were down-town, the same fellow pounced upon Rich, and began to rip and tear. Rich was sitting just outside the dressing-tent, around at the back, and I was inside, patching up something or other, I've forgotten what. I happened to go in there just a minute before the man came over, and I could hear every word. The fellow said the company could take its choice,—quit or sell out to Waring & Wells

and travel around with them. "I don't think it's policy to do either," says Rich, cool as a cucumber. Well, at that the fellow fairly falls over himself, and squeals out that they'll "squeeze us 'til we can't breathe."

"I don't think it's likely he knows anything about Mr. White, or he'd let up mighty quick on his bluffing. I thought we wouldn't run across Waring & Wells again, and I had to laugh this afternoon when their outfit rolled into Corey and camped across the commons from us. They were up to the same job we were, I guess,—making Corey a half-way spot,—for they didn't undertake to give any performance. I could see that Rich looked as solemn as an owl. He imagined they might be going to our next destination, but I think they'll be likely to steer clear of us in the future. We're sort of a hoodoo to their trade——"

"It's strange that the boys shouldn't tell Mr. White about the threats," said Mrs. Coulter.

"I'm afraid the other circus intends to make trouble," interposed Mrs. Cartland, rather anxiously. "What is your opinion, Mrs. Denesmore?"

"Richard has said nothing about the matter in his letters. I really don't believe it amounts to anything. I imagine it's some inferior employee of Waring & Wells who thinks he has found a good chance to frighten the boys."

"I wish Mr. White knew of the fact, at least," added Mrs. Coulter. "I should feel better then."

When Robert had mailed his letter he knew nothing of what had occurred,—the incidents which held such startling significance for the Novelty Circus Company. Two hundred dollars in bills had been stolen from the ticket-wagon, and Ralph O'Leary had disappeared!

Mr. White was mystified. To go on the theory that in broad daylight and with four persons—Richard, Edward, Ralph, and him-

self—within ten feet of the spot, a roll of bills could be removed from the ticket-window by a fifth individual without detection, was apparently the height of foolishness. From the position of the barrel on which Ralph had been sitting, it was evident that he must have had a clear view of the back of the ticket-wagon, and could not have failed to see any one who might have approached. Ralph, then, was the one, and the only one, to throw light upon the matter. Yet he had left some time before the discovery of the theft, and was nowhere upon the grounds.

Ralph's position was by no means a pleasant one. He had disappeared, and so had the money. One might have argued that, if he really had stolen the money, he could easily have avoided suspicion by remaining where he was and professing ignorance. But a boy, unless hardened in crime, would have found it a difficult task to act such a part. With the money in his

possession, his first thought would be of flight.

A brief search had proved that Ralph was nowhere on the circus grounds. Where was he then? Had he run away? What had become of the money?

In five minutes, Mr. White had outlined his plans. Without acquainting any of the others with what had occurred, he asked Edward and Richard to accompany him in an hour's quiet but thorough search for Ralph. There was little or no use of putting the case into the hands of such officers as were to be found in Corey. It was proper and necessary that whatever was done, should be done by him alone, and with as little publicity as possible.

Corey was so small that the three of them had covered every foot of it before the hour was up. Ralph was not to be found; and when Mr. White and the two boys returned to the tents, they were satisfied that he was not in Corey.

This revelation explained nothing, except, perhaps, the fact that Ralph had run away. There was absolutely no clue to his disappearance, unless the other members of the company could throw some light upon the question. Indeed, Mr. White scarcely knew what to believe or how to proceed.

"I don't like the looks of this," he said to Richard and Edward. "Ralph must be found, and as things now stand, there isn't a smell of a clue to work upon. I see no way but to call everybody connected with the circus together and state fairly and squarely what has taken place. We must work out some plan of action immediately. There's a thunder-storm coming up, and I want to get packed up and on the road before it begins to rain. This affair has muddled all my plans. I'll detail both of you to gather the boys together in the dining-tent, and while you're doing that, I'll see what Reynolds, Crawford, Jean, and the rest of the men have to say about this business."

Although Mr. White questioned the five men and the cook very closely, they were emphatic that they had no knowledge whatever on the subject. Puzzled and a good deal troubled, he came back into the dining-tent.

The boys were waiting for him, curious to know why they had been called together in such haste. As may well be supposed, they were astonished at the true state of affairs, which Mr. White set forth in a very few words.

"You can see very plainly why I have told you this," he said in conclusion. "I've determined that this mystery is going to be cleared up, and is going to be cleared up in the shortest possible order. We'll let the loss of the money pass for a moment, and turn our attention to Ralph's disappearance. Do any of you know anything which will give us a clue? I've talked with the men, but they have been asleep all the afternoon, and know nothing of what has happened. Which of you saw Ralph last, and how late in the afternoon did you see him?"

There was an instant's silence ; then Leon Flanders answered :

" I think I saw Ralph last."

" Where?" questioned Mr. White.

" When I came back to the tent from town, I went by the north end of the commons. I saw Ralph standing close to one of Waring & Wells' wagons. He was talking to one of the men."

" At what time was this?"

" I think it was about five o'clock."

" You are sure it was Ralph?"

" Yes, sir. I wasn't very near him—about a block away, I guess. But I'm sure it was Ralph."

" You didn't see him again?"

" No, sir. I didn't pay any more attention to the matter."

" Well," said Mr. White, shortly, " I think there can be no doubt now where Ralph has disappeared to. If no one has anything further to offer, that is all, boys."

Mr. White did not add what conclusion he

had drawn from this information, but Richard feared it was not favorable to Ralph. The president of the company had his own opinion in the matter. He was not ready to divulge it, however, until he understood the facts more thoroughly.

Upon leaving the dining-tent, Mr. White gave orders to pack up at once. It was thundering and lightning ominously, and the storm threatened to burst any minute. The boys showed their sterling qualities by working as hard as the men, with the result that the circus paraphernalia would have been loaded in a remarkably short time, had it not been for a peculiar discovery. In letting down the tents, it was found that a large number of ropes running from stakes to poles had been cut so cunningly that they had all but parted. Here was another mystery, and one which indicated that the company had a secret and malicious enemy. Mr. White was angry, but he held his feelings in control. The men did not attempt

to conceal their indignation, and advised their employer to hunt the perpetrator down, and have him punished to the fullest extent of the law. It was first necessary, however, to find the guilty person, and there seemed to be no clue to his identity and no time for following up a clue, if one had existed.

Waring & Wells had remained at Corey only long enough to rest their horses, and cook and eat an early supper. At fifteen minutes past five, their wagons rattled out of town on a main road which ran due south. Two hours later the Novelty Circus Company bade good-bye to Corey in a deluge of rain, and took the same road.

Rain had begun to fall in big drops as the wagons moved across the commons to the road. A few minutes afterward, the storm burst, and was furious while it lasted. Fortunately, the interiors of the wagons remained perfectly dry, even when the rain settled to a steady downpour.

The boys, usually so light-hearted, were

to-night the personification of gloom. All were thinking of Ralph and the three hundred and fifty dollars, wondering if it could be true that one of their number was a criminal. They crept into their bunks very early, too dispirited even to discuss their possible destination.

The wagons rolled through the mud and water at a swift pace. Richard had heard Mr. White order the drivers to make haste, and he surmised that an effort was being made to catch up with Waring & Wells. He fell asleep at last, with the rain pounding upon the light, wooden top of the wagon, to dream that he detected Ralph taking a large roll of money from Mr. White's coat.

He could not have told what awakened him so suddenly, unless it was the smell of smoke. The rain had stopped, and the horses were plodding along as on former nights. Mr. White, Edward, and Robert Beebe were sleeping soundly.

Richard stole to the rear of the wagon,

opened the door slightly, and looked out. The circus train had emerged from the storm district, and the road was dry and dusty again. A whiff of smoke came unmistakably to Richard's nostrils. A yellowish light seemed reflected faintly on everything.

He went back to the front of the vehicle. The driver was dozing, almost asleep. And not many rods distant, so near that the horses were already snorting with distrust, flames were shooting up from an object that looked to be directly ahead of them in the road.

"It's a bridge, and it's on fire!" exclaimed the president, shaking Dan Reynolds into wakefulness.

CHAPTER XIII

RALPH TURNS UP

WHEN the caravan of the Novelty Circus Company rolled out of Corey, it carried a cargo of very tired men and boys. Their exertions in packing and in loading the wagons preparatory to a hurried departure had had their effect, and the subsequent strain of driving through the storm and keeping in the road made the lot of the drivers on this particular occasion a hard one. While Mr. White, Jean, and the boys were enjoying comfortable slumbers, it was necessary for the other men to remain at their posts. It was no wonder that Dan Reynolds, the driver of the first wagon, relaxed into a doze at about four o'clock in the morning when the circus train was nearing a bridge which spanned Barlett River, eight miles north of Springfield.

"Hello!" cried Dan, starting into wakefulness as he felt Richard's hand on his shoulder. "What's up?"

At the same instant he caught sight of the burning bridge.

"Cracky!" he burst out, reining up his horses quickly, and thus bringing the whole caravan to a standstill. "I'd have driven into it in another minute."

"The smell of smoke woke me up," said Richard. "I thought at first that the wagons were on fire."

"Say, Richard," added Dan in a low voice, pulling the president down so that he could talk into his ear. "You won't peach on me, will you? I couldn't help dozing off, you know. I wasn't asleep, and I was keeping the road all right. Yesterday done me out!"

"Of course I won't," declared the president. "And Mr. White wouldn't think of discharging you for that, anyway."

The sudden halting of the wagons had sent the boys tumbling out of their bunks.

Almost before Mr. White could spring up and dress, they came running up to the leading wagon, impatient to be told what had happened and why the bridge was in flames.

"I can't understand how a wet bridge can burn," puzzled Mr. White, trying to shake the sleepiness from him.

"It isn't wet," laughed Richard. "It hasn't rained in this quarter. Don't you see the dust in the road?"

"Why, to be sure!" exclaimed Mr. White. "I must be half asleep yet. I was just about to come to the conclusion that it had been struck by lightning."

"I don't think 'so,'" said the president, emphatically.

"Do you think it was set on fire, Rich?" asked Carl Dennison.

Perhaps Carl's question suggested the idea, although it may have entered Richard's mind just at that instant, for he burst out with :

"That explains it! I know who set that bridge on fire! It was the fellow from Waring & Wells,—the fellow that's been threatening the company all this time. Their circus went this way. They had two hours the start of us, but we've driven fast, and I'm almost sure, Mr. White, that they're only about half a mile ahead this minute!"

"You say somebody from Waring & Wells has been threatening. Not the man I heard you talking with two weeks ago?"

"Yes, sir!" replied Richard, relieved to find that he could explain his actions at last. "I thought his threats didn't amount to anything."

"And it seems they did," mused Mr. White, thoughtfully.

"I believe it," said the president.

"I wish, Richard, that you had told me about this before. I had no suspicion that anything of the kind was occurring. If they are responsible for setting fire to the bridge in order to delay us, I haven't a doubt that

the cutting of the ropes can be traced to the same source."

"That's right!" agreed the president. "It's plain enough to me now."

"I shall want to hear the story in detail a little later," added the manager of the company. "Just now, we must turn our attention to getting out of here. I don't want to be late in arriving at Springfield, and it's evident that we cannot cross the river at this place. The bridge will fall in a few minutes."

Mr. White's surmise was correct. The blazing timbers of the structure suddenly collapsed and fell with a roar and a hiss of steam into the water, where they floated slowly down-stream on the current. All that was left was a black and smoking ruins.

"Dan," said Mr. White, looking at his watch, "you may turn about at once. We'll have to go back and hunt out a new route."

"There's only one road we can take," an-

nounced Paul Strouble, unexpectedly, "and that's five miles around."

"Are you positive it's that distance?" questioned Mr. White, quickly.

"I know this part of the country to a T," answered Paul. "Two of my cousins live a mile from here, and when I have been visiting them in the summer, we would ride around on our wheels a good deal,—make expeditions all through the neighborhood, you know."

"I don't like to spend the time five miles will take up," remarked Mr. White, anxiously.

"You don't need to."

"What do you mean, Paul?"

"I think there's a place very near the bridge where the river can be forded. There used to be a shallows somewhere about this point."

"Do you think you can find it to-night?"

"I'll try it," said Paul, "if you'll let Dan go with me or come yourself."

"We'll both go," declared Mr. White.

A lantern was lighted, and the trio made their way through the fields to the banks of the stream. Arriving at the water's edge, Paul took the lead, using the light to guide him. He was a little in advance of the others when he came upon the location of the sand-bar, and he shouted the news back to them.

Mr. White very soon satisfied himself that the crossing could be made at this point in safety. Dan, who was equipped with high boots which he had slipped on for the occasion before leaving the wagons, waded across to the opposite shore and declared when he returned that "she was as stiff and solid as a turnpike," and that the wagons could be driven over without wetting their boxes.

Leaving Dan and Paul at the shallows in order that no time might be wasted in re-locating their exact position, Mr. White made his way back to the circus train, and

drove the wagon, which had been in Dan's charge, in the direction of Paul's lantern. The other vehicles followed.

As the leading wagon, Mr. White still driving, began the crossing, Dan strode ahead, testing every foot of ground before the horses ventured upon it. Bartlett River was scarcely more than a good-sized stream at this place; so that within a little over a half-hour, the caravan had crossed, and was again in the main road and proceeding on its way to Springfield.

When he came to think it over, Richard was surer than ever that the bridge had been set on fire by the man with whom he had had such unpleasant relations. To be sure, the president had thought that the threats against the Novelty Circus Company amounted to nothing and would never be carried into effect; but the rope-cutting and the burning of the bridge had changed his opinion completely. These two stratagems, so cunningly executed, were plentiful evi-

dence that Waring & Wells had begun to act.

Just why Ralph had taken it into his head to run off with the other circus was a question not easily answered. *Had* he run away? And if he had, was he the one who had stolen the two hundred dollars?

Richard, for reasons he felt but could not explain, was more than ever unwilling to believe Ralph guilty; still he was puzzled over the meaning of his actions.

He wondered what Mr. White intended to do in the matter. Would he follow up the other circus? How was "Human Animals" to exhibit with one of its chief actors missing?

After the excitement of the bridge episode had worn off and the company was proceeding on its way, most of the boys were satisfied to tumble once more into comfortable bunks. In the leading wagon, however, Mr. White, Richard, Edward, and Robert were awake, and were discussing the recent occurrence, and what significance it could have.

“ You spoke something about the threats of a certain fellow from Waring & Wells, Richard,” said Mr. White. “ Tell us the story in full.”

Richard began with the time when the company's first acquaintance with Waring & Wells was made, and told all that had occurred between the “ ugly man ” and himself, omitting nothing. Mr. White's face showed considerable surprise and relief.

“ Richard, if you had told me all this two weeks ago, it might have saved us a great deal of trouble,” remarked the manager. “ I know that you thought nothing was going to come of it, that we wouldn't run across the other circus again, and so forth ; but the unexpected always happens. What you have said about the Waring & Wells people is sufficient proof to convince me that they really fear us as a formidable antagonist, and have done these things in order to delay and annoy us. Whether the fellow who has been doing the threatening is responsible

for the work of last night and this morning doesn't matter particularly, as it is evident that some member of their company is the author of the mischief. At any rate, I am of the opinion that Ralph has been kidnapped for the sole object of crippling 'Human Animals.'"

"Kidnapped!" Richard burst out. "Then he didn't run away, after all!"

"I'm pretty sure he did not, in the light of our conversation just now. The fellow probably counted on preventing us from exhibiting by getting one of the boys out of the way."

"What are you going to do?"

"Ralph must be found," said Mr. White. "My plan is to see the company safely established at Springfield. Then I shall attempt to discover the whereabouts of Waring & Wells. They cannot be far from Springfield,—probably at Lessing; and once where they are, I shall get Ralph and bring him back."

"Perhaps Waring & Wells are at Springfield."

"Hardly," said Mr. White; "they would have had their bills up when I was there posting mine, if they had had any intention of making the place."

"What if you can't find Ralph?"

"Well, we won't worry on that score. If he's with Waring & Wells, he can be found; and if things are as I think, they'll hear from me in a way they won't relish!"

Three-quarters of an hour later, Springfield came into view. Richard, drowsy from loss of sleep and stiff from sitting long in one position, swung himself to the ground for a short tramp. He was some distance in the rear of the wagons when he saw, plodding along a road running at right angles to the one on which the company was traveling, a figure that he recognized at once. He sped back to the leading wagon to announce excitedly that Ralph was coming back.

The caravan was stopped, and in a mo-

ment Ralph reached it. He was covered with dirt from head to foot, as if he had been rolled in it, and he looked almost exhausted.

"Where have you been, old man?" Edward called out.

Ralph tried to smile a little as he came up to the wagon.

"The Waring & Wells fellow kidnapped me," he explained. "I've walked ten miles, I guess. I feel like it, anyway."

"You must get to bed," said Mr. White. "There'll be plenty of time to hear your story afterward."

CHAPTER XIV

A COURT IN A CIRCUS

IN Ralph's exhausted condition, he fell into a heavy sleep almost immediately, and did not awake until the Novelty Circus Company had been several hours in Springfield.

It was Sunday, and a more beautiful day would be hard to imagine. The sun shone in a blue sky, but its heat was lessened appreciably by a cool breeze from the north, blowing from the region where the deluge of rain had fallen the night before. It was a day when one is glad to be alive, and the boys felt the spirit of it.

The members of the company went to church with Mr. White as usual. Ralph had not awakened when they set out, and the cook was instructed to see that he had a good breakfast when he did. It is to be

feared that several of the boys at least were able to keep their minds but little on the sermon. Richard could think of nothing except Ralph, and whether or not he had really stolen the three hundred and fifty dollars.

Upon their return to the grounds, Mr. White found that Ralph was up and was eating breakfast in the dining-tent.

"I am going in to talk with him," he said to Richard and Edward. "Both of you are concerned in this affair, so perhaps it would be well for you to come with me."

Except for the deep lines under his eyes and a small cut received, as it was afterward learned, during his attempt to escape, Ralph was none the worse for his unpleasant adventure.

"Well, Ralph, how do you feel?" asked Mr. White, as they entered.

He looked up quickly, and choked a little on the food he was swallowing.

"Mr. White," he said, brokenly, "they

say you think I stole two hundred dollars. I didn't run away last night, and I didn't steal the money! I didn't know anything about its being in the ticket-wagon."

"Some of the men have been telling you this, I suppose," said Mr. White. "Remember, Ralph, you are not guilty until you are proven guilty, and I don't think that you can be proven guilty from what I know now. But it's my duty to clear up this mystery, and so I want you to tell your story in detail. We want to get at some clue to the business, if we possibly can. The facts we have to work on at present aren't enough. I've no doubt that you can explain your actions, but we must have that explanation, you know. You come up missing at the same time the money does, and we find you've gone off with Waring & Wells' circus. Doesn't that look a little suspicious?"

"But I didn't steal the money, and I didn't run off with Waring & Wells!" exclaimed Ralph, tears starting to his eyes.

"You said they kidnapped you—wasn't that it?" suggested Edward.

"Tell us the whole story, from the time you left the grounds," said Mr. White.

Ralph began, and told his story from the moment he had left his seat on the barrel to his conversation with the man who had invited him to inspect the wagons of Waring & Wells.

"He was the same fellow who threatened you, Richard," said Ralph. "He was terribly nice just then. Wanted to know how our circus was getting along, said it must be quite a novelty to take so well, and so on. I answered him civilly, though I knew well enough what kind of a fellow he was. After a minute or two, he asked me if I didn't want to see how Waring & Wells lived."

"And you stepped inside the wagon," anticipated Mr. White.

"Yes, sir. I didn't think there could be any harm in taking a peep inside. I was

curious to see what quarters they had, and I meant to stay only a minute or two."

"Did the fellow seem anxious to get you inside?" queried Mr. White.

"As I think of it now, it seems to me he did, though I never thought of his having a purpose in it at that time. Just as I went up the steps, two or three men came up with a team of horses and began to hitch them to the wagon. The whole outfit was getting ready to leave when I first came up.

"Well, the instant I put my head inside, I wished I hadn't. Every window and ventilator was closed, and it was so hot I could scarcely breathe. To cap the climax, the fellow shut the door, saying he'd light up so that I could see better. The storm was coming up then, you know, and it was pretty black.

"It was getting hotter and stuffier in the place all the time, and I asked him to open the windows or something, and let in a little air. I'd gotten enough of the business by

that time, anyway, and was about ready to go.

“ But instead of doing that, he asked me how I’d like to travel with Waring & Wells on a ‘ nice little salary.’ I thought he was joking at first, and told him I hadn’t any inclination to get a larger salary than I was receiving. I didn’t like his way of joking, and I thought it was about time for me to leave.

“ Just a few seconds after I had climbed into the wagon, it began to move. The fellow said that they were driving down past the south end of the commons on their way out of town, and that I might as well ride as walk. When I thought we must be pretty near the place where the company’s tents were located, I walked toward the door, intending to get out. .

“ But he got directly in my way, and said I couldn’t get out ; that he had decided he could use me in their circus, and that I was going around with them a few months. I

told him to let me out instantly, but he laughed and said that if I didn't shut up he'd shut me up. There was no use of trying to get out after that. I'd have been gagged for my pains, and suffocated in the bargain. All I could do was to study out some plan and wait for my opportunity."

"That fellow is capable of doing anything, and I knew it!" exclaimed Richard.

"How did you get away?" asked Mr. White.

"Well, after we had gotten a little way out of Corey, the fellow evidently thought that I wouldn't make any more trouble, and he opened up the wagon and began to move around, always keeping an eye upon me. I couldn't understand for the life of me how he expected to prevent me from escaping for any considerable length of time, unless he locked me up or tied me up. I wondered if he intended to sit up all night and watch me.

"After a while, he lit a pipe and tried to

talk to me, but I didn't have anything to say, and he gave it up. I dozed off several times after that. Every time I woke up, he was sitting there watching me, and I couldn't help thinking that he was a fool he didn't tie me up and go to sleep. I concluded he didn't want to tackle me alone.

“ Finally—it must have been a good many hours later—the wagon stopped, and some one, I think it was the driver, came around to the door. The fellow that was guarding me opened it a trifle, and they whispered together a moment. I heard something about a bridge, and the fact that the driver had agreed to tell him when we reached it. Then something was said about looking after me.

“ Finally, the driver squeezed himself through the door, and the other fellow squeezed himself out. The driver kept watch of me for about twenty minutes; then the first man came back, and they exchanged positions once more. We drove pretty fast

after that,—I suppose to catch up with the rest of the circus.”

“I don’t suppose you understood what the man was doing at that time,” said Mr. White. “Well, I’ll tell you. He set fire to a bridge that we had to cross. We were forced to ford the river or go around, and Paul fortunately thought of a place where the stream could be forded.”

“He did that, did he?” exclaimed Ralph in astonishment. “I couldn’t imagine what on earth he was up to, but I suspected it was something along that line.”

“Finish your story, Ralph, and we’ll discuss these other things afterward,” added Mr. White.

“It wasn’t very long,” continued Ralph, “before we stopped again, and I could hear the driver swearing, as he jumped down from his seat. I figured it out that something had broken about the harness. I guess I was right, for he came to the door presently, and declared he couldn’t fix it.

They got into a discussion about the matter, and during it the door was pushed wide open. I thought I saw my chance, and I took a flying leap and went through the doorway, nearly knocking both of them down. I struck the road and rolled over and over in the dirt, but managed to get up and run for it.

“I didn’t know where you were going, but I heard some of the boys say that it must be either Lessing or Springfield. I had a hazy idea that Springfield was somewhere directly south of Corey, and the only thing I could do, and did do, was to find my way back to the main road running north and south,—we had turned off west from it——”

“Waring & Wells must have gone to Lessing,” Mr. White reflected.

“It was beginning to get daylight,” Ralph went on, “and I was mighty thankful it was. I could never have found the right road if it had been dark. Well, you know

the rest,—how I came across you on the outskirts of Springfield.”

“ I’m afraid there is little use in trying to make Waring & Wells suffer for this just now,” said Mr. White. “ But if they ever run up against us again, they will find the hardest proposition they have ever struck. I like your pluck in getting away from them.

“ What I particularly desire at the present time,” he added, “ is that this money affair might be cleared up.”

“ I know nothing about it at all,” repeated Ralph, earnestly,

“ You cannot remember seeing anybody about the wagon before you left, except Richard, Edward, and myself? ”

“ Not a soul ! ”

Mr. White said nothing for a moment. He was more in the dark than ever concerning the mystery, and he did not like to acknowledge himself beaten.

“ I wish,” he announced at last to Edward

and the president, "that you boys would find every man and boy connected with this circus and send him in here at once. This is Sunday, but I don't think it will hurt to conduct some kind of an investigation now and at this place. It seems necessary to me that we get at the root of this business immediately."

Richard and Edward were not slow in executing their errand. Everybody was quickly assembled in the dining-tent. Jean, the cook, demurred at leaving his dinner, but promised to appear in the circus court for a period not exceeding five minutes, when he was needed.

In a few words, Mr. White explained his purpose in bringing them together, detailed the facts of the thefts, and declared that anything which would throw light on the questions should be stated.

"Dan," he began, when these remarks were finished, "you may take this chair here, and answer the questions I shall put

to you to the best of your knowledge. Question number 1—do you recall any facts about this affair that I have not already given? ”

“ I know nothing about it—didn’t even know how it happened until you told me. I was asleep almost all the afternoon.”

“ Were you anywhere near the ticket-wagon? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ And saw no suspicious-looking persons around at any time during the day? ”

“ Nobody I know of.”

“ Were all the other men asleep, Jean included? ”

“ I guess they were.”

“ That will do.”

Mr. White made the rounds of the men and the boys, but absolutely nothing which would be of some service in finding a clue could be learned. No stranger had been seen on the grounds after the people had left the tent at the close of the afternoon per-

formance. Richard, Edward, and Ralph repeated their stories, but they seemed to prove but one thing,—that Ralph and the president were the only ones who had excellent opportunities for stealing the roll of bills. Of course, there still remained the possibility that some person not connected with the circus could have come and gone without attracting notice, but it did not look very plausible that such was the case.

“May I make a suggestion?” asked Richard at last.

“Certainly,” said Mr. White.

“These thefts have only occurred when Waring & Wells’ Circus has been around.”

Mr. White brushed his hand over his face thoughtfully.

“I’m glad you made that suggestion, Richard,” he said. “It would seem to put us on a new track. At any rate, as matters are, I cannot credit the idea that either of you boys are guilty of stealing the money. Court is adjourned!”

CHAPTER XV

THE FOURTH MEETING

IF one has ever traveled with a circus, he knows that a week is the longest, and yet the shortest, period of time he has ever lived. So much is crammed within the space of twenty-four hours that, when he looks back upon those events, he wonders how he managed to take part in all of them without Mercury's winged staff and sandals. And he is even more puzzled that, despite the thousand and one things he has seen, and heard, and done, he is at a loss to understand the rapidity with which the hours and days have flown.

These were precisely the feelings of the members of the Novelty Circus Company, when they looked back over their tour. They declared with a unanimous voice that

they had enjoyed a year's fun in what seemed to be only a day, and was in reality six weeks.

The boys were brown as berries, had appetites that would have done credit to young savages, and might have been mistaken for South Sea Islanders by their own mothers, with Mr. White in the rôle of copper-colored chief. Perhaps Mrs. Denesmore would have had some difficulty at first glance in recognizing Richard, as he came down the steps of one of the wagons which were standing on a large commons in Lake City on the last day of their trip.

It was early in the morning, and the circus train had just arrived at its final destination. Richard, in loose, belted trousers and soft shirt, paused for an instant on the steps of the vehicle to drink in the pure morning air and enjoy the scenery spread about him before setting about the more practical task of toilet-making. While he stood there, Edward came out, yawning and

rubbing his eyes, apparently rather inclined to give up the merits of early rising, and retire again to his bunk to snatch another hour's bliss.

"Let's give up star-gazing and go back to bed, Rich," said Edward, stretching out his arms until his left met the president's ribs.

"If you don't wake up pretty soon, I'll try the water cure with you!" returned Richard, taking hold of the vice-president's coat, and hauling him down the steps. "Aren't you aware that this is our last day?"

"Perfectly aware, my dear sir, perfectly aware!" drawled Edward, stretching and yawning once more. "That's why I'd like to sle-eeep and forget it!"

Richard laughed. "See that pump over there, Ed?" he questioned. "Well, the first one over has the fun of seeing the other fellow do the pumping and lug the pails back to the grounds afterward."

"Taken!" shouted Edward; and each

equipped with a pail, they were off like a shot, Edward in the lead but Richard winning by an extra spurt at the end.

True to his compact, Edward pumped the water with a pretense of loud and vigorous grumbling, while the president lolled on the grass near by and looked on. When they started to go back, Richard relented and relieved the vice-president of half his burden.

"So to-day is the *last!*" Edward volunteered, as he set down his pail of water and executed a sort of war dance.

"The very last, my lord," replied Richard. "And I'm going to make a day of it that I won't forget in a hurry. In fact, I'm going to enjoy it just as if I couldn't have another good time in the world,—such as going to college next year," he added, laughing.

"What is it I hear about this wonderful celebration?" demanded Mr. White, appearing suddenly on the scene.

"Edward and I have determined to make this a red-letter day in history—that is, in

the history of the Novelty Circus Company," explained Richard.

"Is yours a private celebration, or may a third person join with you?" inquired Mr. White, his eyes twinkling.

"It is open to any one who will contribute," smiled Richard.

"Well, then, I've a mind to enter," added the manager. "I've heard of a place here in Lake City where one can get the finest meal in the land. My contribution, then, will be to give Jean a well-earned rest, and escort every member of the Novelty Circus Company out to dinner."

"Hurrah!" shouted Edward, swinging his cap in the air. "By the great horn spoon, uncle, is it to be a fifteen or twenty course affair?"

"My beloved nephew," observed Mr. White, in feigned displeasure, "if you allow your ideas to run to such extravagance, I shall feel it my duty to put you upon a diet of crackers and water."

"Oh, well, I'll cut my courses down to twelve, then," compromised Edward, as if he were doing the generous thing.

After all, it was no wonder that the boys felt in excellent spirits. A month had passed since that stormy night when Ralph O'Leary and two hundred dollars had so mysteriously disappeared. And four weeks of sight-seeing, a rapid whirl of pleasant and diverting events, with the success of "Human Animals" becoming more pronounced every day, was time enough to forget that the theft of the three hundred and fifty dollars had never been accounted for, and that the company had not yet been vindicated.

But if the slightest shadow of guilt hung over Ralph or Richard, neither worried over its existence. If they thought about the matter at all, they thought of it as some disagreeable occurrence, dimly discernible back in the past, but having no right to haunt the present. If the mystery had not been solved,

it was, at least, no fault of theirs. Mr. White had said that he cared nothing at all for the loss of the money ; it was the honor and integrity of the company which were at stake. And certainly no one could believe that either Richard or Ralph was capable of stealing.

Had Richard discovered the slightest clue to work on, he would have been eager and determined to follow it to the end, and prove to Mr. White and to the company that neither he nor Ralph was guilty of so mean an act. But there was no clue ; and hence there could be no means of getting at the truth. The money had disappeared ; there was no explanation, theoretical or practical, which could be plausibly applied to the disappearance ; therefore, it was best to put an end to puzzling over it, and forget that it had ever occurred.

And that was precisely what the boys had done. Mr. White, after the circus court had held its first and last session, had never

mentioned the subject, and the excitement of circus life had soon turned the attention of the boys to other and more pleasant considerations. Of course, Richard could not rid his mind entirely of his desire to know who it was that had taken the money. He would have given a great deal to satisfy himself on this point, and in a sort of subconscious way he was always alert and ready to seize upon a promising clue, if such a clue should by any chance be discovered.

As for "Human Animals," the last four weeks, and in fact the whole period of the tour, had been one long and continuous triumph, financially as well as otherwise. The circus had promised well; it had turned out to be even better. The excursion had been a success far beyond Mr. White's expectations. Both he and the boys had seen much, learned much, and enjoyed the experience to its utmost. And besides all this, there was the additional satisfaction to the members of the company of earning by their own

efforts the necessary funds to maintain themselves for some time at college.

Except for two or three disagreeable days, the weather during the tour had been all that could be desired. To-day, the last day of the trip, promised to excel all others in fairness, although a fiery hot sun rising on a cloudless sky gave suspicion of a storm not twenty-four hours distant. If "Cap'n Bob," the gallant friend of the Novelty Circus Company back in Quarry, could have been present to comment on the signs, he would have found occasion to shake his head solemnly and assert that "judgin' by where he came from, there was a cyclone in the air and no mistakin'."

"I'm near roasted, Rich!" groaned Edward in anguish of body, as he sank down on the grass beside Richard in the shade of the dining-tent. "It's actually beastly!"

"Well, you see," returned the president, laughing, "the weather is bound and determined to give us a good hot day for a

send-off, and wind up with a good, old-fashioned cyclone."

"A cyclone?"

"Exactly. Is it possible that the vice-president of the Novelty Circus Company doesn't know what a cyclone is?"

"You bet he does!" replied Edward, shivering. "He came within half a mile of one once."

"And you don't want to see another?"

"Not if the court knows herself, which she does," declared the vice-president, with emphasis. "I saw the ground it went over afterward, and such a sight as it was! Great trees that had stood half a century torn out roots and all, houses smashed into kindling wood, great holes sucked in the ground,—by the great horn spoon, it was awful!"

"I hope we won't have anything of that kind," said Richard, "but you can notice for yourself how uncommonly sultry it is, even this early in the morning."

"If we do have any wind while our tents

are up, there'll be a few balloon ascensions that aren't on the program."

"And then the people will be talking about one of the greatest concerns in the country going up in wind!" punned Richard.

"We won't be joking, if we get mixed up in a cyclone," declared Edward. "I propose we drop the subject. I don't like to think about the possibility of having that kind of a storm any more than you would like to see Waring & Wells again."

"For goodness' sake, don't mention Waring & Wells!" protested the president, laughing. "I hope we're done with them forever and aye. Suppose we discuss college a little."

"Bravo! Rich. You never struck a better subject. A year more of high school, and then off and away! By the great horn spoon, it makes me fairly turn cold to think we might have been hoeing potatoes at seventy-five cents a day, and baking our-

selves in the bargain, instead of living like princes on a salary of a hundred dollars a week ! ”

“ And your uncle has made the trip possible, Ed. I think the whole bulk of thanks belongs to him. You might say that he was the one that ‘discovered’ us.”

“ Well, I’ve always thought a good deal of Uncle Will, but I think a good deal more of him now,” said Edward, warmly.

“ You must remember he gave up a trip to Wisconsin to make our fortunes,” reminded the president. “ I’d be proud to have such an uncle ! ”

“ Well, I guess he’s been uncle to all of us for six weeks,” observed Edward. “ Say, do you know, if it wasn’t for thinking of that cyclone business, I could go to sleep this minute. I can hardly keep my eyes open now.”

“ Oh, don’t let that keep you awake,” smiled Richard. “ I’ll agree to call you when I see it coming.”

"You're kind, Rich, but I'm half of the opinion that it would strike such terror into your soul that you would leave me to my fate, and escape."

"I thought we weren't going to talk on cyclones," said Richard.

"Right!" drawled the vice-president, sleepily, as he lay back with hands clasping his head.

"How much money over and above salaries do you think we have taken in?" he inquired, presently.

"I can't even guess," replied Richard. "I suppose, though, we'll know before long. It may be that expenses have been heavier than we think."

"Just you wait and see!" prophesied Edward. "I'll bet ——"

The vice-president had turned his head, which lay a little beyond the corner of the tent, far enough around to get a view of the road. Suddenly, he straightened into a sitting posture with a jerk.

“Well, Rich,” he said, calmly, “if we can’t have a cyclone right away, we *can* have Waring & Wells!”

Richard jumped to his feet. “You don’t mean that War——”

For answer, Edward pulled him around the tent, and pointed out a shabby line of wagons coming slowly in the direction of the commons.

CHAPTER XVI

THE UGLY MAN THREATENS

MR. WHITE arose early on the last day of the tour. He was in high spirits, for he stood at the end of a long and delightful outing which, two months before, he had little dreamed of experiencing, and he realized with considerable satisfaction that the trip had been well worth while, both to himself and the boys. It was such a trip as he had craved all through years of relentless business activity, and it had made a new man of him. To get out in the open once more, to travel from place to place with a circus so marvelous as "Human Animals," to eat and sleep for the pure love of these things, and, best of all, to become a boy among boys again,—this was living!

And to-day was the last! This was all he regretted. If the company could have gone

on and on, free to travel where it pleased—but this could not be. School in Quarry opened only a week distant, and his own leave of absence was fast drawing to a close. The tour of “ Human Animals ” was soon to be over, but Mr. White would never be able to forget that tour, and it was a pleasant thought for him to contemplate the surprise and delight of the boys when they received their checks, so far in advance of the handsome salaries they were to get according to contract.

To know that they had earned those checks and to know that the money was to make college a reality for them, were facts of which the boys might rightly be proud. To realize that he had made these things possible for them was more than a repayment for their manager. He had guided their fortunes for six weeks, and he felt that his remuneration had been ample.

Lake City was an all night's drive from Oreford, their previous stopping place, and

the journey had been far from comfortable. A dense, stifling atmosphere seemed to have settled over the country through which they were now traveling, and sleep was well-nigh impossible. The hours between midnight and morning grew gradually warmer until, at daybreak, only the appearance of an angry red sun was needed to make the heat almost unbearable.

Fortunately, Lake City was reached at an early hour, and the men at once set about erecting tents and putting the circus paraphernalia in place, hoping to complete their tasks before the sun climbed far in the heavens. Mr. White had determined to make these last exhibitions of the company a grand climax to the trip,—in short, a day which would not soon be forgotten. Flags were soon streaming from the main tent in profusion, and the show grounds began to put on a gala appearance. Mr. White had engaged the Lake City Star band to head the parade, and after this event, the whole

show was to adjourn down-town to dinner. By means of all this advertising, the manager was confident of attracting large crowds at both performances, if the weather held out well.

But he had not counted upon a few factors in the day's program, and one especially which was to make it crammed full of startling surprises for him and the Novelty Circus Company. And that factor was none other than Waring & Wells' Consolidated Shows.

The company ate an early breakfast, after which Mr. White found that there was considerable leisure time on his hands before the parade. He had deputized one of the boys as postman for the day, and until he should return from the post-office with the morning's mail, there was nothing of especial importance to occupy his attention.

He wandered about the grounds until the baking rays of the sun drove him under the shelter of the dining-tent. There he seated himself near the door in a position to catch

any breeze that might happen to be blowing, and glanced over the *Lake City Daily Call*. He had purchased the paper early that morning from a newsboy who had been enterprising enough to offer his wares to the show people. He soon found, however, that he was not reading, but dozing ; so he put down the paper, thrust his hands into his pockets, and began to stride up and down the length of the tent.

Once he paused suddenly at the south entrance to the tent. Something just coming into view interested him far more than *Daily Call* news. For behind a cloud of dust, kicked up by the feet of many horses, could be discerned in the distance the faded and battered blue wagons of Waring & Wells, en route for the commons.

Mr. White did not relish the situation. The other circus was the last thing on earth he wanted to see at this time. He was not afraid of Waring & Wells, or what they might do. On the contrary, he was half

glad of the opportunity to "settle scores" with them. But they were not advertised for Lake City, and he held that they had no right to come into competition with the Novelty Circus Company. Furthermore, this was the company's last day out, and he wanted the field to himself.

He stood gazing at the caravan as it drove upon the vacant lots across the road. He was wondering just what tactics he should pursue. Should he undertake any? If they minded their business, perhaps it was best to ignore their presence utterly. But if they took one more step against the company, they would find that he was not a man to be trifled with.

Still debating these questions, he left the dining-tent and walked over toward the ticket-wagon, led in that direction by an impulse which he could not account for. So engrossed was he in his thoughts that he scarcely noticed a small, lithe figure dart from the ticket-wagon just before he reached it.

The figure was a little girl, and she fled away across the commons like a frightened deer.

Mr. White did not see her until she was several yards from the wagon, but he was convinced that she had been in the vehicle. What she could have been doing there was a conundrum. He watched a moment and saw her disappear among the wagons of Waring & Wells. Without question, she belonged to their circus.

Mystified, though even then having a suspicion as to the real significance of the incident, Mr. White climbed into the ticket-wagon and looked carefully around. There was nothing of particular value in the wagon at that time, and what was there had not been disturbed. He stayed inside but a moment, for the sun beat fiercely down upon the roof, and since the vehicle was closed tightly except for one small window, the heat was intense. As he came down the steps, he almost collided with Richard.

"Hello!" exclaimed the president, side-stepping quickly in order to avoid bumping into the manager. "You are the very one I've been looking for. Have you seen Waring & Wells over there?"

"Just noticed them five minutes ago," returned Mr. White, smiling a little at Richard's evident alarm. "I must say that I'm at a lost to understand why they should come here, as they are not advertised for this place. However, I don't think they will care to interfere with us this time."

"Don't you? I'm afraid they will," said Richard, shaking his head a bit anxiously. "I'm expecting a visit from the 'ugly man' almost any minute."

Richard had been keeping an eye on the actions of the other circus while he talked. He fully expected a call from the fellow who had threatened the company, and he was not to be disappointed.

Not long after Waring & Wells drew up on the grounds across the road, a man

descended the steps of one of their wagons, glanced for an instant in the direction of the commons where "Human Animals" was to exhibit, and finally started to walk straight toward the tents of the Novelty Circus Company. It was the "ugly man" in truth!

With a quick movement Mr. White stepped behind the ticket-wagon where he could not be seen by the fellow from Waring & Wells, as he approached. Richard had pointed him out, and Mr. White instantly agreed with the boy that the fellow was coming on his old errand.

"I seem to be wrong about their intentions in regard to troubling us," he said hurriedly, motioning the president to his side. "Richard, I've thought of something which may put an end to this nuisance. I want you to get out where he can see you. I shall be in the background, and overhear what he has to say. If he sees me first, he'll be very likely to keep still, and I want to find out, if possible, just how he goes about

his threatening. I shall appear at the proper time, and he and I will proceed to settle this matter. Draw him out as much as you can. In that way we can get rid of him once and for all, when he finds out that I am in possession of the facts."

"That's just what I've been wishing for—to let him talk with you once!" exclaimed Richard, with a great deal of satisfaction. I'll go over on the west side of the dining-tent. You can slip inside without being seen, and hear every word."

During the interval in which Mr. White and the president were taking their positions, the "ugly man" was striding up to the camp of the Novelty Circus Company, unaware that a trap was waiting for him. He thought he had chanced upon Richard alone, as he had done upon previous occasions. The other men and boys were in or around the main tent.

The fellow from Waring & Wells had an unusually ugly look in his eyes, as he came

up to Richard, who was tightening a slack in the tent rope, and dropped a heavy hand on the boy's arm. The man seemed coarser and more unkempt than before, and the excessive heat did not add to his good temper.

"Look here, boy, ain't you got enough of Warin' & Wells?" he demanded, blackly.

"The sample has been quite sufficient," returned Richard, looking the fellow straight in the eyes.

"You little pup, what do you mean by insultin' me again?" sneered the Waring & Wells' representative.

"I think you have been doing most of the insulting," remarked the president, quietly. "Have you come over here to cut any more ropes?"

"Who says I've been cuttin' any ropes?" bawled the other, a gleam of satisfaction lighting up his evil face.

"I do. You don't seem to deny it."

"I've warned you youngsters more than once to steer clear of Warin' & Wells," went

on the fellow, evasively. "They won't stand for your trackin' them."

"Do you know that bridge-burners and kidnappers are fit for the penitentiary, and usually get there before long?" questioned Richard.

"What rot are you talkin' now?"

"You know what I mean."

"Don't know anything about it."

"Well, your memory may be refreshed later."

"What you drivin' at?"

"I'm only saying that if you don't let us strictly alone in the future, you'll hear from us, and in a way you won't like," stated Richard, decisively. "Didn't it ever occur to you that we had a pretty good manager behind us?"

"Trot him out, and let me have a look at him," said the man, insolently.

"Well, it wouldn't be well for you if I did."

"Oh, you're afraid, eh? 'Fraid I'd do him up so quick you wouldn't know where

he'd gone to. Well, I want you to know, kid, that Warin' & Wells's stood all they're goin' to from you fellows. You've got to the end of your little game. We won't stand for it no longer, an' if you don't quit, we'll make it so hot for you, you'll smother!"

"Why don't you do something besides threaten, then?" said Richard, curtly.

"Do somethin'? Haven't we ——" The Waring & Wells' *attaché* caught himself, but too late.

"That's a nice little confession to make," remarked Richard. "So you won't deny, after all, that you cut the ropes around here, burned the bridge, and tried to kidnap one of the boys, just to see if you couldn't put us out of business?"

"You'll find out what Warin' & Wells will do!" raged the other. "You've stuck yourselves under our nose too much!"

"And this time at Lake City where we advertised several weeks ago, and you haven't a bill up."

“I’ve come over here to make you quit, even if I have to pull down your tents!” exclaimed the fellow from Waring & Wells, with an oath, opening a knife and starting for the nearest tent rope.

Before he could reach it, Mr. White stepped out and confronted him with flashing eyes.

“So it’s a fellow like you that’s been bullying the boys, is it?” he thundered. “I don’t want even an explanation from you! I’ll give you just five minutes to leave these grounds, and five minutes more to send the manager of your company back here. If you’re not gone in five minutes, I’ll put you off; and if the head of your show isn’t here within ten, I’ll bring over a sheriff. I’ve got plenty of evidence to put you where you belong!”

Mr. White stepped back and opened his watch.

CHAPTER XVII

A NEW COMPLICATION

FOR the first time, Mr. White and the "ugly man" were face to face. It was not a pleasant meeting, for Mr. White spoke with determination, and the fellow from Waring & Wells realized that he meant what he said.

Richard was the most excited of the three. For some time he had been wishing that the very thing which was happening now might come to pass. Once the Waring & Wells *attaché* knew that the boys were under the powerful protection of Mr. White, it was very likely that his threatening would come to an end.

The president believed that the "ugly man" was a bully and a coward, and in this he was not mistaken. The moment the fel-

low saw Mr. White and understood that he would be as good as his word, his whole manner changed. He tried to conceal his real villainy as best he could, and broke out into a forced laugh.

“What’s the matter, pard?” he grinned, addressing Mr. White. “I ain’t been doin’ nothin’.”

“Not a word from you, sir!” interrupted the manager of the Novelty Circus Company, sternly. “I know the history of this business thoroughly. You have three minutes left to get off these grounds, and five more to send back your manager. I’ll talk with him, not with you!”

“I ain’t hurt nobody!” whined the fellow from Waring & Wells. “Just jollyin’ with the kid a little.”

“You lie!” said Mr. White. “I’ve listened a full fifteen minutes to your threats and abuse, and yet you stand there and say you haven’t any object in coming over here. You’ll find I’m not a man to be trifled with.

Are you going now, or am I to help you along? ”

The fellow no longer attempted to mask his true feelings. His face fairly blazed with hatred, and he shook his fist and swore at Mr. White.

Richard began to feel somewhat alarmed. The “ugly man” was of a powerful build and looked to be more than a match in strength for the manager of the Novelty Circus Company. Mr. White might be handled roughly, if he attempted to carry out his purpose without assistance.

But Edward’s uncle, though not a large man, was exceedingly wiry and active. When the fellow from Waring & Wells showed no intention of leaving the circus grounds, and even began to threaten Mr. White himself, that gentleman deemed that it was time to act. Returning his watch to his pocket, he walked up to the man, seized him by the collar, and almost before the other had time to recover from his surprise,

whirled him around, and with a none too gentle blow with his boot, sent him staggering in the direction of Waring & Wells' encampment.

"Remember, you ruffian," Mr. White called after him. "Your manager must be back here in five minutes, or you suffer the consequences!"

When the "ugly man" was some distance away, he stopped and looked back, shaking his fist once more. They saw him cross the road, and he was finally lost to view among the wagons and tents of Waring & Wells.

Just at that moment, Edward came around the corner of the dining-tent. Harvey, Charley, and Robert were with him.

"That was a cracker-jack of a send-off you gave him, uncle!" exclaimed the vice-president, admiringly. "We heard the gnashing of teeth, got a glimpse of the fellow, and slipped up. Thought we'd have to rush in to the rescue."

"Do you think he'll send the manager back?" asked Richard of Mr. White, who was striding up and down with hands thrust into his pockets.

The manager of the company was disgusted and angry. "If he doesn't, there are other ways of bringing them to terms," he declared firmly. "I'm going to see whether they'll keep up this kind of business. I've never heard such insolence as that fellow addressed to you. It's high time the matter was looked into."

"Do you think they'll try to use any more violence?" questioned the president.

Mr. White laughed a little. "I don't imagine they'll relish that sort of thing, after I've had my talk with the head of their circus," he said.

"Are the five minutes up?"

"Not quite."

"Suppose their manager doesn't come?"

"He will be here, all right. If not, we shall have occasion to make them a visit. I

want the head of their company to understand that I will not tolerate any more of this business."

Richard was gazing hard at the headquarters of the other circus. As yet there were no signs of the manager of the rival show. The president wondered what sort of an individual he would be. He had never known Mr. White to be so angry as he was at the present time, and he was excited as to the outcome of the interview.

Mr. White again glanced impatiently at his watch.

"A half minute, and the time's up," he said.

"He's coming," announced Edward, suddenly.

From among the tents and wagons on the commons across the road, a short, excessively fat man emerged, and waddled slowly in the direction of the Novelty Circus Company's grounds.

"I shall have to ask all of you except

Richard here, to stay out of sight," remarked Mr. White. "You are at liberty to remain within hearing distance, if you care to."

The boys promptly disappeared, and when the head of Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows strutted up to the place, Mr. White and Richard were alone. The manager of the rival circus wore the air of a man who makes it possible for the earth to revolve on its axis. He came into the shade cast by the dining-tent, wiped his perspiring face, scrutinized Mr. White and Richard patronizingly, and began to twirl his heavy gold watch-chain between his fingers.

"What d'you want?" he snapped, sharply. "I'm a busy man."

"I want to talk with you," said Mr. White. "Are you the manager of Waring & Wells?"

"That's my job."

"Very well. What is the name of the fellow that gave you my message?"

"What of it?"

"Do I understand that you decline to answer my question?"

"That's about it!" sneered the manager of Waring & Wells, wiping his heated face.

"I take it that you know all about the little game this fellow has been trying to work with us?"

"What game? What right have you got to insult me?"

"Well, sir," replied Mr. White, taking a step nearer, "I am the manager of the Novelty Circus Company, which is composed of the boys you see about here, and it will be a great deal better for you if you answer my questions, and answer them right. You understand the reason."

"Don't know anything about the matter."

The short, enormously fat man shoved his hands into his trousers' pockets and glared at Mr. White.

"You don't deny, sir, that as manager of Waring & Wells' shows you have control over your circus?" went on Mr. White.

"Certainly, I have control."

"And know all that goes on relative to your circus?"

"Are you insulting me again?"

"Nothing of the kind. I'm simply trying to find out the man who is at the bottom of this outrage."

"Sir, I am unable to understand you!" puffed the big little man.

"You still decline to give me the name of the man who was just over here?" repeated Mr. White.

"It's none of your business, as I can see."

"Now see here, my man. I believe you know the facts as well as I do. This hireling of yours has threatened Richard here on several occasions when your show has been in the same place where we were exhibiting. He has tried to buy the boys up, tried to run them off the grounds, tried to bully them in every way. I have plenty of evidence on these points—enough to arrest your man several times over.

"In addition to this, he has on one occasion cut or caused to be cut a number of our tent ropes, kidnapped one of our boys, and burned a certain bridge a few miles north of Springfield in order to delay and annoy us and cripple the company. I can prove everything I have said."

"It's a lie!" shouted the manager of Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows, his face turning from an angry red to an angrier purple, as he realized that he was in a tight place.

"It's the truth," declared Mr. White, quietly, "and I'm inclined to believe that you're at the bottom of it. If you're not, it's time you knew what was happening. Now, sir, what have you to say why I should not prosecute you at once?"

"I tell you I don't know anything about it!"

"That makes no difference. You are liable, and I am at liberty to claim damages. I want to know what you are willing to do about it."

“Wha-a-t I—am will-ing to do?” stammered the corpulent man, becoming frightened. “Why—I’ll think it over ——”

“I’ve no time to let you think it over,” interrupted Mr. White in a hard voice. “I shall begin proceedings at ——”

“I’ll—I’ll have to a—a—I’ll have to talk with ——” Waring & Wells’ efficient manager could get no farther.

“What is your name?”

“Wells.”

“All right, Mr. Wells. I’m a man of my word, and if I say I’ll proceed against you, I’ll do it. I’ve stood one hundred times what I ought to from you, and I want you to understand plainly and candidly that if you undertake another step against this circus or any of its members from this instant, I’ll see that we have our rights in the matter. If we are molested again by you, you must stand the consequences. That’s all I have to say to you.”

Mr. White turned sharply on his heel, and

the manager of Waring & Wells departed as hastily as if the ground blistered his feet.

Mr. White looked at his watch, and turned to Richard.

“Well, Mr. President,” he said, quietly, “it’s drawing pretty close to parade time.”

It was hard to say just how the interview with Manager Wells had resulted. Certainly, Mr. White had gotten small satisfaction from the head of the rival circus; but he had had the opportunity to say what he wished, and whatever Waring & Wells did in the future as against the Novelty Circus Company would be done with a full knowledge of the consequences of the act.

“What do you think the ‘ugly man’ will do now, Rich—let up?” asked Edward, as the boys made ready for the parade.

“I don’t know,” answered the president, doubtfully. “I rather think Waring & Wells have something up their sleeve.”

“You do?”

“It looked that way to me this afternoon.”

“ Well, they had better try it on ! They’ll find we won’t stand for everything ! ”

“ I may be mistaken,” added Richard, “ but I got the impression that the man Wells was acting a part.”

“ We’ll make it interesting for them if they try it again.”

“ It doesn’t matter so much with us now,” remarked the president. “ It’s our last day ; rather a pity they don’t know that this is the last time we’ll spoil their trade,” he added, smiling.

“ I’ll warrant they’ll be sorry to lose us,” drawled Edward.

For the first time during their tour, the boys failed to enjoy the parade, and the explanation thereof was contained in the one word—heat. The sun burned the earth with rays that became more and more blistering with the passing moments. The scantiest shade and tiniest breeze became royal luxuries. For this reason, the “ Human Animals,” incased in their skins and exposed to the sun,

were not in a state of perfect bliss. They were thankful enough when the return to the grounds gave an opportunity to change clothing and rest.

But the parade had made a decided "hit," nevertheless, and when a little later they marched, dressed in their uniforms, to the hotel where dinner was to be served, a second big advertisement for "Human Animals" was assured. Had the weather been less warm, an exceedingly large crowd would have turned out to the afternoon performance; as it was, many who desired to see the circus waited until the evening performance, in the hope that it would then be more endurable to move about. But in spite of this, the afternoon attendance was good.

It was about half-past four—after the circus was out for the afternoon, and the grounds were deserted by all but a few of the boys—Edward, Robert, and the president happened to be strolling by the dining-tent. Edward poked his head in as they passed,

and after a moment's hesitation, wholly disappeared.

"Come here, fellows!" he shouted. "There's something wrong about this box of skins. The thing's wide open, and it looks as though somebody had been ransacking it that had no business here."

The other two ran in quickly.

"That's a fact!" exclaimed Richard, as he saw the condition of the huge chest in which the animal costumes were always kept. "Some of the skins are gone!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEARCH WARRANT

RICHARD dropped to his knees, and began taking out the skins from the huge chest.

"Here, Ed—or Rob, one of you fellows," he directed, "get a pencil and check these things off as fast as I run them over."

In a minute or two, Richard had removed everything that was left in the box, and it was found that three sets of the animal costumes were missing,—namely, those of the bear, lion and orang-outang.

"I know who's at the bottom of this business," the president exclaimed, unexpectedly, as he rose to his feet. "It's that fellow from Waring & Wells!"

"Why, I thought Uncle Will had scared them to a finish," declared Edward.

"I thought so, too," added Richard. "But

you can see for yourself that they've got it in for us."

"They won't be able to use the skins," Robert put in.

"And we can't, either!" replied Richard, a little impatiently, for he realized just what the loss of the skins meant to the company. "Don't you see the point? They knew well enough that if they got hold of the skins, our circus would be ruined. I'd like to find out whether it was that thieving ruffian from across the commons that took them, or whether he sent some one else to do the job. I wish we had thought far enough to lock the stuff up the instant we were through with it, or put somebody on guard."

"When do you suppose it was done?" asked Robert, staring at the skins which Richard had begun to put back in the chest.

"That's easy enough to answer," said the president. "It's only a little over half an hour since the afternoon performance was

out and the outfits put away. It must have been during that time."

"Don't you suppose some of the fellows were around the dressing-tent and saw the person who came in?"

"That's what I'm going to try to find out," announced Richard, shutting the lid of the box and snapping the lock in place.

"Won't do any good to shut the barn door now," Edward reminded him. "They've taken all they wanted."

"Well, there are some other horses in the barn, you know," returned the president. "I'm bound to keep them. Where is your uncle, Ed?" he continued, slipping the key into his pocket. "We must tell him about this right away."

"I think he's taking a nap in our wagon. He just came back from depositing the money we took in this afternoon in the bank, and he was so hot and tired that he said he thought of going to bed awhile."

"I don't like to wake him up," remarked

Richard, "but he ought to know about this affair now."

Both Edward and Robert agreed that it was wrong for Mr. White to remain in ignorance of what had taken place. Accordingly, they appointed themselves a committee of three, and started immediately for the wagon in which the manager was enjoying a brief siesta. But the boys had not taken over ten steps from the dressing-tent before Mr. White's cheery voice hailed them from behind, and they wheeled about to see him entering the tent from the opposite side.

"Thought you were asleep, uncle," Edward called out, as the three hastily returned to the tent.

"Well, I tried it," said Mr. White, wiping his perspiring face, "and I've concluded that I could stay awake with more enjoyment. The heat is something terrific, isn't it? I've half a mind to call off to-night's performance, and take things as easy as possible for the rest of the day."

"We may have to give it up, anyway," remarked the president.

"What's the trouble, Richard? I thought your face looked rather queer when I came up, but I imagined the heat accounted for it. Has something happened? Anybody sick?" Mr. White's tone was at once solicitous.

"Worse than that," answered Richard. "Our old friend, Waring & Wells, has just paid us another call ——"

"Another call?"

"And *borrowed* three sets of our animal skins," added Richard.

"Can that be possible!" exclaimed Mr. White, getting his meaning. He walked over to the place where Richard was already unlocking the big chest.

"We discovered they were gone about ten minutes ago," the president continued, as he threw back the lid, and showed the manager the vacant place on top where the bear, lion, and orang-outang skins had been packed.

"Wasn't the box locked just now?" inquired Mr. White.

"I locked it and took the key with me when we started to bring you the news. The box was open when we first saw it."

"I should have had enough foresight to see that the box was kept locked to-day," put in Mr. White. "I must say I hadn't the slightest notion that they would resort to anything like this."

At that instant Ralph O'Leary, who was sauntering past, stopped and looked in.

"Hallo! What sort of a council is this?" he asked, glancing curiously from the open chest to the little group which stood about it. "If I'm not wanted, just say the word, and I'll depart," he added, pausing in the doorway.

"Come in, Ralph," invited Mr. White. "Your Waring & Wells' kidnapper has just been kind enough to relieve us of three of our best skins."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the aston-

ished Ralph, hurrying up to them, and peering over Robert's shoulder at the contents of the box. "I had the idea that those fellows were afraid to venture out of doors by this time."

"We appear to have mistaken our men," remarked Mr. White.

"Let me think," continued Ralph, wrinkling his brows as if trying to recall something vague and far away. "Didn't I see somebody come out of here nearly three-quarters of an hour ago? That was about the time the skins were taken, wasn't it?" He turned to Mr. White and the boys for corroboration.

"About that time, I think," said Mr. White.

"I was lying on the grass east of the big tent, and was almost asleep when I saw some object run out of the dressing-tent. I guess my first impression was that it was one of the fellows, but it seems to me now that what it most resembled was—well, a little girl!"

"Of course, you couldn't describe the girl?" questioned Mr. White.

"I'm not sure even that it was a girl," declared Ralph. "No, I don't think I could tell a thing about her."

"This morning," said Mr. White, "just before Richard informed me that Waring & Wells were here, and that he expected a visit from the 'ugly man,' I happened to go over to the ticket-wagon, and as I came up to it, I saw a little girl in a pink dress run out and speed away in the direction of Waring & Wells. I couldn't imagine what she could have been doing there, but if the girl I saw and the girl Ralph thinks he saw are one and the same, I shouldn't be surprised if——"

Mr. White paused, appearing to weigh something carefully in his mind.

"Do you know," said Richard, suddenly, "the very day when that two hundred dollar roll of bills disappeared, I thought I saw a little girl running around a corner of the

dining-tent. I could just make out that she was wearing a dress of some bright color. I didn't think anything about it then."

Mr. White looked surprised.

"We may be able to put these things together after a little," he suggested. "But time is slipping by, and something must be done about getting these skins back. I'm determined to have them before night and to give our evening performance as usual, if such a thing is possible. We will show Waring & Wells that we intend to do business."

"Are you going to demand them to give back the skins?" inquired Robert, rather dubious as to the effectiveness of such a procedure.

"Such a demand as that would only afford them a good chance to laugh at us," answered the manager. "You must remember that we can't prove, at the present time, that they actually have the skins in their possession."

"I don't see then ——" began Robert.

"Don't you? Well, I'll enlighten you," returned Mr. White. "I shall get a search warrant, and call on them."

"By the great horn spoon!" exclaimed Edward. "I can see the face of that Waring & Wells' manager when he catches sight of the warrant."

Fifteen minutes later, Mr. White with Richard and Edward close behind, walked into Justice Sanderson's office. The justice laughed heartily when Mr. White had completed a rather humorous sketch of their various encounters with Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows, and he made out the warrant readily.

"I hope you won't have trouble in serving this," he chuckled, as he handed Mr. White the paper. "Better take the sheriff along with you, in case this man Wells attempts to eat you up. You'll have to have some officer, you know, to do the serving."

"Where will I be able to find the sheriff?"

"I'm going over his way, and will show you," volunteered Mr. Sanderson, obligingly.

The four of them left the office together, and walked rapidly down the street. Justice Sanderson was a large, fleshy man, and he frequently wiped his perspiring face, until his handkerchief was wet from the huge drops of water that rolled down his cheeks.

"Terrible day, this!" he commented, trying to smile. "Hottest day Lake City's seen in ten years."

"I've been too busy almost to notice the heat," returned Mr. White, "but I'm quite aware that I never felt so uncomfortable in my life."

"Wouldn't wonder if we'd have a cyclone to-night," predicted Richard, as he scanned the heavens thoughtfully.

"Be careful of your prophecies, young man," said Mr. White, smiling.

"I'm inclined to believe you are right," said the justice, speaking to Richard. "I hope not, as cyclones are not in my line, but

I have never known such a heavy heat wave to settle down as the one we're enduring now."

"I must stop predicting cyclones, I guess," remarked the president. "The first thing I know, we'll be losing trade. People won't dare to venture out to our circus this evening."

"Don't be so fast to talk about our evening performance," Edward reminded him, laughing. "We haven't the skins yet, you know."

"Well, I guess we'll have them shortly," said Richard.

"I'm a little afraid of the cyclone business myself," observed the justice, as they stopped before the sheriff's office. "By the way, I saw your circus this afternoon, but forgot all about telling you how I enjoyed it. Believe I'll go again to-night, if you'll promise to tip me off on any cyclones that happen to come around, so I can get out of the tent in time."

"Oh, we'll do that!" laughed Richard.

It was nearly six o'clock when Mr. White and the boys, in company with Sheriff Hughes, reached the grounds of Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows. Most of the showmen were at supper, but they found the manager seated in a chair near the entrance of the main tent. He jumped up in a hurry when he saw the little party approaching, and recognized Mr. White and the boys.

"What d'you want now?" he demanded, angrily, before Mr. White had an opportunity to speak.

"I think you understand what we want, Mr. Wells," replied the manager of the Novelty Circus Company, quietly. "This afternoon, between the hours of four and five, you relieved us of some of our animal paraphernalia. You remember what I said during our little talk this morning. You have taken the step I warned you against."

"We haven't touched your old skins!" exclaimed Waring & Wells' manager, hotly, as he eyed the sheriff.

"As we have a different opinion, I think we shall have to look around for ourselves," remarked Mr. White.

"You can't look around here!"

"Officer, show Mr. Wells the paper you have with you," directed Mr. White.

"These gentlemen," said the sheriff, exhibiting the search warrant to the astonished and dismayed manager, "want only their rights in this matter. They have good reason to believe that the skins are in your possession at the present time, for the reason that they saw a little girl, belonging to your circus, in the tent where the skins are kept at about the time the skins must have been stolen. They have seen this girl around several times before. The best thing you can do is to conduct us around yourself."

"You won't find anything!" growled the manager, sullenly, but he obeyed.

For three-quarters of an hour they searched high and low over the premises of the rival show,—through wagons, tents, peering into

boxes and barrels and rummaging in every nook where the skins might possibly be hidden. Several times they caught glimpses of the little girl who had been seen on different occasions around the tents of the Novelty Circus Company, but each time she did her best to avoid them. At fifteen minutes of seven, Mr. White ordered the search to come to an end. They had looked in every place they could think of, but the skins were not to be found.

CHAPTER XIX

A LITTLE DETECTIVE WORK

"I THINK we have seen all we care to," said Mr. White, as the little searching party finished making the rounds of Waring & Wells' encampment.

"Oh, you're satisfied, are you?" sneered the manager of the rival circus, exultingly.

"No, we are not satisfied."

"You've looked around to suit yourselves."

"But we haven't found what we're looking for," replied Mr. White with emphasis.

"Don't you suppose, if we had the skins, you'd find them?" demanded the big little man.

"My not finding them here leads me to think you have them hidden somewhere else."

"Listen to that!" exclaimed the other, turning to the sheriff. "I suppose if he found the stuff somewhere on his own grounds, he'd say that we put it there."

"From all the circumstances in the case that I know of," replied the officer of the law, "I think he has good reason to suspect you strongly. I would advise you to give up the skins at once, or inform us where they may be found."

Manager Wells laughed mockingly.

"We'd be very likely to give up something we didn't have, wouldn't we?"

"See here, man," interrupted Mr. White, sternly, as he glanced at his watch, "I've no time for dilly-dallying longer. If you refuse to hand over the skins, then you can face the consequences of a damage suit."

"You can't prove I stole 'em!" stammered the rival manager, off his guard for the instant.

"Perhaps not; but I can prove enough against you with regard to previous affronts

of yours to make out a good case against you in this instance."

"You won't dare to!" puffed the big man, boldly.

"You'll find me a man of my word, Mr. Wells. If I say I'll prosecute you, I'll put every effort forth to get my rights."

Mr. White did not care to involve himself in a suit with the other circus, but he wanted to frighten its manager enough to induce him to give up the skins. It was the last day of the Novelty Circus Company's trip; there would be no further opposition with Waring & Wells; and it was not at all worth while to undertake a prosecution which might be very costly in the end besides consuming time which Mr. White could ill-afford to lose. Nevertheless, had he declared his intention of commencing proceedings, he was not the one to back down.

"I haven't heard your decision in this matter yet," went on the manager of the Novelty Circus Company, after he had

waited some time for the other to speak. "Do I understand that you are willing to stand suit rather than hand over our property at this time?"

"How you going to hand over what you don't have?" persisted the fellow, sullenly.

"Very well. Sheriff, we may as well go."

Mr. White wheeled about sharply, and accompanied by Sheriff Hughes, Richard, and Edward, began the return trip to the grounds of the company.

"I've a mind to sue them for damages yet," said Mr. White, indignantly, as they walked away. "Of course, it would cost a great deal and take time I can't very well spare, but there would be some satisfaction at least in punishing them."

"I don't believe it's worth while, as you say," declared Edward.

"Perhaps not. I wish, though, that there was some way of bringing them to time before our evening performance, but there is nothing to be done that I think of. I might

have Wells arrested, but that would be of small good, as their circus could go on as ever."

"Do you think they have the skins in some place where we didn't happen to look?"

"We made so thorough a search, it seems scarcely possible, and yet the stuff must be concealed somewhere."

"Well, gentlemen," said Sheriff Hughes, "unless I can be of further help to you, I'll go back. I'm sorry this thing hasn't turned out successfully. It will prevent your showing to-night, I presume."

"I'm afraid so; I don't care so much for that, however, as for the fact that they have outwitted us. We may find some way of crawling out of this difficulty yet. Meanwhile, I am very much obliged to you, sir."

"If you need me further, don't be tardy in calling upon me," said the sheriff, smiling, as he turned and walked away toward Main Street.

"What time is it, Mr. White?" asked Richard.

"Exactly seven-five."

"Then we have a little over an hour's time before the evening performance," exclaimed Richard, brightening up. "I've just had an idea. I don't know what it amounts to, but it won't take long to find out."

"If you can locate the skins, Richard, you shall be honored before all men!" laughed Mr. White. "But say," he added almost immediately in a more serious tone, "I don't believe it's advisable to go back and spy upon Waring & Wells."

"I don't intend to do that, sir. I've come to the conclusion that they really haven't the skins on their grounds. They've hidden them in some other spot."

"I see," remarked Mr. White. "How long do you intend to be gone?"

"'Til I get the skins!" declared the president, smiling determinedly. Then he added

hastily: "Not more than half or three-quarters of an hour. If what I suspect now turns out to be true, I shan't be away that time."

"I suppose you don't want my humble services?" put in Edward.

"There's where you're wrong. I don't know as there'll be much doing, but I'd like some one along just the same."

"Well, Richard," said Mr. White, as they came up to the tents of the Novelty Circus Company, "I hope your idea wins out. I'm rather afraid, however, that our evening performance is doomed never to occur. Those people across the road have put us just where they want us—in a bad fix."

"We'll know for certain before eight o'clock whether my ideas are worth anything," said Richard, grimly humorous.

"You should have something to eat before you go."

"Supper can wait," returned the president.
"I'm not hungry just now. Are you, Ed?"

"Couldn't swallow an oyster. By the great horn spoon, let's be off! We can have a lunch afterward,—eh, uncle?"

"That you can."

"I want to ask one question of Ralph. There he is now!" exclaimed the president.

"How did you make out?" demanded several of the boys, who had come up to meet the little party and find out the result of the search warrant.

While Mr. White and Edward were explaining the matter, Richard drew Ralph aside.

"Ralph," he said, "you told of seeing a little girl, or what you thought was a little girl, running out of the dressing-tent between four and five."

Ralph nodded.

"Which direction did she take?" asked the president, eagerly.

"It seems to me now that she ran off in that direction," replied Ralph, pointing toward a rising mound or bank of earth,

scantily covered with bushes, to the extreme east of the commons.

"Good!" exclaimed Richard, involuntarily. "Much obliged, Ralph."

"I say, what's up?"

"Tell you about it later. Time's short now."

Richard left him and hurried over to Edward.

"All ready!" he announced.

The two boys started out at a dog trot.

"What have you got in your head now, Rich?" began the vice-president when they were clear of the tents and were well over toward the elevated piece of ground.

"Well, I don't know that I can put it in words exactly. I've sort of a feeling that I'm on the right scent, you know," confessed Richard. "In the first place, I've come to the conclusion that Waring & Wells haven't the skins on their grounds."

"You mean that they didn't steal them?"

"No. I mean simply that they have

hidden them somewhere else and not very far away, either. It's only necessary to guess where they've put the stuff."

"What were you asking Ralph about?"

"I wanted to find out which way he saw the girl go. He said he saw her run over in this direction, though he couldn't be sure."

"She couldn't carry the whole outfit over here at once."

"She may have taken several trips."

Edward and the president had stopped running, and were walking slowly up to a bank seven or eight feet high which stretched in a jagged line across the east end of the commons and slanted upward at a slightly increasing angle. It was covered with a scraggly growth of wild rose bushes and smaller underbrush, and there were deep fissures along the sides where heavy rains had washed out the sand. In some cases these fissures or crevices were almost concealed from casual view by shrubs and plants of various kinds.

Grasping some of the bushes which offered a firm resistance and had no thorns to tear his hands, Edward drew himself to the top of the bank and peered around.

"Don't believe we'll find the stuff up here," he declared, after he had examined the ground for a minute. "There isn't cover enough up here to hide a hat."

"Of course not," Richard called back, "and I don't expect to find anything up there. If she wanted to keep people from seeing what she did, she wouldn't try to climb to the highest place possible. She'd naturally follow this bank around until she was out of sight of our tents and of those houses over there."

The vice-president scrambled down to the level of the commons once more, and the boys went on.

"My idea," said Richard presently, as they turned the corner that shut them off from a view of the Novelty Circus Company's camp, "is that she dumped the skins

in some one of these shallow holes along here, thinking that this would be the last place we'd think of looking. And I don't think she did it on her own account, either. Waring & Wells' manager or the 'ugly man' made ——"

"Hello!" exclaimed the vice-president unexpectedly, dropping to his knees and examining a seam in the bank which looked particularly suspicious owing to the bushes which nearly concealed its existence. He got up again, rather disappointed, for he had found nothing.

"There's a black-looking opening along here somewhere," said Richard, searching the bank with careful eyes as they went along. "I remember noticing it in going by here once."

"What's that?" demanded the vice-president, excitedly, showing Richard a big, square hole in the side of the bank, crudely braced at the entrance with wooden supports and leading back apparently for some distance.

"A cave—or looks to be. Probably the work of some of the fellows in Lake City."

Edward approached nearer, and looked inside.

"Come on, Ed. We can't afford to waste time in exploring caverns just now."

Edward came back a little reluctantly, and they walked on, hunting diligently for ten minutes or more with no success. At last Richard turned about.

"We'll have to give the business up. We're to the end of our rope, Ed," he said. "My idea wasn't ——" Suddenly, he stopped, and seized Edward by the arm.

"Ed Donough, what fools we are! The skins are in that cave!"

They dashed for the cave, breathless, and crawled in like two giant rats.

"Any matches with you, Rich?"

"Here." The president found Edward's hand and thrust a few of the tiny sticks into it.

"I've found them!" shouted Richard, his voice quivering with triumph.

In another instant they were out of the cave, dirty and full of cobwebs, but with the precious bundle in their possession. Every part of the skins was there.

Richard jerked his watch from his pocket and looked at it.

"Ten minutes to eight," he shouted.
"Back to the tents for your life!"

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST PERFORMANCE

As the time for the evening performance of "Human Animals" drew near, a strange and seemingly unaccountable thing happened. From early morning the heat and sultriness had increased until, at seven o'clock, it was physical torture to exert one's self to any great extent. Even after the sun had set, the temperature gradually crept higher, an ominous forewarning of a hard storm not many hours distant. But at very nearly eight o'clock, when there was small chance that people would stir from whatever comfort was to be found in their homes, a cool breeze sprang up and drove out of sight banks of angry black clouds which had been piling up about the western horizon since the late afternoon.

It was a very welcome change. People who had made themselves as comfortable as they possibly could, refusing to move for any cause less than a matter of life or death, now concluded suddenly that they wanted to see the circus. There were two circuses in town,—the Novelty Circus Company and Waring & Wells,—but if the latter show seated a goodly number of people under its canvas, “Human Animals” fared even better. The animal parade of the morning had done its work, and coupled with the favorable reports of those who had attended the afternoon performance, attracted no mean crowd to the circus grounds at night. The ticket-wagon soon became the centre of a laughing, good-natured throng of men, women and children, all eager to forget the discomforts of the day in the fun that was to follow.

To-night, the ticket-wagon was not occupied by Mr. White. Stanley Carr was there, taking in money and dealing out the narrow

slips of pasteboard by the wholesale, but the manager was pacing restlessly up and down outside the dining-tent. He was still uncertain whether or not the evening performance of "Human Animals" could be given. Richard and Edward had not returned from their search for the missing skins, and the time they had been gone rather indicated that they had failed to find them. Mr. White, however, had determined to take the risk of selling tickets to those asking for admission, and if no show were given, refund them their money.

At five minutes of eight the situation became almost hopeless. The manager was all but convinced that Edward and the president had set out on a wild goose chase, and that it would be necessary in five or ten minutes more to make an apologetic speech to the crowd in the big tent and return them the price of admission. At present, the audience was being royally entertained by the band which had been engaged for the

day, and had no suspicion as to the real state of affairs.

It was well that Mr. White was a man who was not afraid to run risks when they involved nothing dangerous, for sharply at eight o'clock two boyish figures came into view in the dusk, dashing at neck-break speed for the tents. They were Edward and the president, and a certain bundle they carried with them spoke the whole story.

"Tell the boys to jump into their rigs in a hurry!" shouted Mr. White to Ralph who stood not many feet away. "The circus will start in two minutes!"

Ralph had seen the boys coming and was eager to hear the story of their find, but he understood how important it was that the circus machinery should be at once set in motion, and ran off with Mr. White's orders. Almost upon his heels came Edward and the president, panting and gasping, stopping at last in front of the manager.

"We've found them!" were their first

words. "The girl had hidden them in a cave!"

"Cave——" repeated Mr. White, peering into the gloom in the direction from which they had come. But he recovered himself almost immediately. "Never mind the particulars just now, boys. Carry those skins into the dressing-tent at once," he directed. "Hold! I'll do part of that carrying, myself. You're tired out, both of you. Richard, I want you to rest and eat your supper immediately, and Edward the same when he is done with his part in the first act."

"You mean to say we've got any kind of an audience?" demanded Edward in surprise.

"Just a tent full—that's all!" smiled the manager. "The people have been as thick as bees around here, dating from the beginning of this cool spell. I was too nervous myself to stay in the ticket-wagon, so Stanley is doing the honors. I took the risk of letting people in, allowing them to keep

their tickets in order to be able to refund them their money, if the show didn't take place. Of course, none of them dreamed that they were asked to hold the tickets on that account."

"And never will dream of it now," put in Richard.

"Thanks to our secret service men, Messrs. Donough and Denesmore," laughed Mr. White. "I was afraid at the last moment that the circus would have to be given up."

"So were we. After we found the skins, we ran like deer to get back."

"I know it, and I was willing to give up two performances simply for the satisfaction of locating them," returned Edward's uncle, as they reached the dressing-tent. "Remember my instructions about supper, boys," he added.

"I'll go and relieve Stanley in the ticket-wagon, till Ed is ready to eat," announced Richard.

"Very well," answered the manager; and leaving Richard, he and Edward passed on into the dressing-tent.

Ralph had reported Mr. White's orders promptly, and the scene within was a busy one. The boys were rushing to get into their costumes in the shortest possible time, and each of them was so well acquainted with his own responsibility that all was running as smoothly as clockwork. Despite the disadvantages they had labored against for the last few hours, the members of the Novelty Circus Company were determined to show themselves at their best, and, as nearly as lay within their power, begin on time.

While the crowds in the tent were applauding the first act, Richard hurried around to the side door of the ticket-wagon.

"Hello! Stanley," he called, rattling the knob.

Stanley knew his voice and let him in.

"Had the door bolted, eh?" began the president. "Good plan ——"

But Stanley was already interrupting him. Had the skins been found? Where? And was the circus going to be given?

"Found!—and the show's begun," said Richard. "Located them the last minute in a cave over on the east side of the commons. We think the girl had hidden them there."

Stanley thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled.

"By all that's lucky!" he exclaimed. "I've been kicking myself to think that we might have to return the money we've taken in to-night. Mr. White said that was the only fair thing to do, if we couldn't give a performance."

"How much are the receipts?" queried the president.

"Haven't counted yet, but they're pretty good. It's been so hot up to within a half an hour ago that people haven't dared to

peep out of doors. That cool breeze saved us. Queer it should spring up as it did. Had your supper yet?"

"No, I'm waiting for Ed to get through with his act. Say, Stanley, you haven't left any money in that box over there by the ticket-window, have you? What's that roll of bills or something doing out on the counter there ——"

The boys had been standing near the centre of the wagon under a small swinging kerosene lamp which Stanley had lighted just before the president came in. For the first time during their brief conversation, Richard became alive to the fact that Stanley had left the receipts from the evening performance in an unguarded position on one side of the ticket-window. As the president's eyes swept the place at this instant, something occurred that made him jump toward the window with one mighty bound. The next move he made was to dash for the door and rush out into the night.

When he reappeared at the door of the wagon a minute later, he climbed slowly in without speaking. Stanley gave one look at his pale face, and then shook him frantically by the shoulders.

“Can’t you tell a fellow what’s the matter?” he shouted in his ear. “What have you been doing?”

For answer, the president led him over to the ticket-window, and pointed significantly to a box arranged at one side for holding the money received from the sale of tickets.

“There was a roll of bills lying outside that on the counter, wasn’t there? How much was it?”

“Why, that roll was stuck way back in the corner!” protested Stanley, indignantly. Then his eyes opened wide. “Great Cæsar! it’s gone!” he blurted out, hunting dazedly this way and that.

“Of course it is,” replied Richard, soberly. “Gone for good, and I saw it go. How much was it?”

“ Fifty dollars,” said Stanley, as if he were waking from some horrible dream. “ But I can’t see —— It was lying way over there in the corner. No one —— ”

“ Just as I looked,” explained Richard, “ I saw an arm poked through the window toward the side that the money was on. I made a dive, but I was a trifle too late. I couldn’t get my fingers on the hand before arm, hand, and bills had vanished. There wasn’t a trace of anybody outside.”

“ What kind of an arm and hand did it look to be—a man’s ? ” questioned Stanley, excitedly.

Richard started as the recollection of a small, tightly-fitting sleeve, and a small, dainty hand, so clever in eluding his grasp, came vividly before his mind.

“ Good gracious ! Stanley,” he exclaimed, a light breaking upon him. “ It must have been a little girl that stole the money ! ”

“ Well, it’s all owing to my carelessness, anyway, Rich ! ” groaned Stanley. “ Mr.

White cautioned me about keeping a sharp lookout. I had the door locked, and thought I was perfectly safe. Besides that, I was sure that I had every bit of money entirely out of reach of any one outside. That bunch of bills must have rolled in front of the window."

"I think we ought to notify Mr. White at once. It seems to me that it was time we were catching this thief."

"Hold on ; let me put the rest of this coin away," said Stanley, unlocking a small iron safe that stood just under the window.

When the boys climbed down from the wagon, they became aware instantly that the outer atmosphere had undergone a startling transformation. Instead of the cool wind which had been blowing but a little while before, they found that the breeze had died out completely, leaving the air more heated and impure than ever.

"Why, it's a regular bake-oven out here !" declared Stanley, astonished and frightened

at the abrupt change in temperature.

"What's happened, anyway?"

"It acts very much like a hard storm of some kind," replied the president, anxiously.

"The clouds are piling up thick and fast in the west."

"Where are you making for?"

"The dressing-tent. Mr. White will be there, likely."

The lights in the big exhibition tent were burning brightly, and the band was swinging through a lively air. Above the music, applause and laughter occasionally rang out. Evidently the audience was enjoying itself.

Out of doors, the blackness was growing more and more intense, as the storm-clouds, sullen and low-hanging, swept by to join forces in the west. Richard and Stanley made their way around the big tent with some difficulty, frequently stumbling over stakes and ropes which it was too dark to make out.

“Stop!” cried Richard suddenly. “Didn’t I hear a groan, then?”

“Somebody making a noise in the tent, I guess.”

“No, it wasn’t. Listen!”

The boys stood perfectly still, cocking their ears for a possible repetition of the peculiar sound. It came again during a lull in the merrymaking inside the main tent, and this time it was distinct and almost at their feet.

“I tell you somebody’s hurt!” insisted the president, groping about in the direction from which he judged the voice came. “Hello! Hello! Where are you?” he called several times in succession.

“Here!” echoed back Mr. White’s voice, oddly faint and weak.

The boys found him lying on his side, as if he had tripped upon a taut rope and fallen in a way to strike his head an ugly blow on one of the iron-capped stakes. They did not discover at once that his right

leg was deeply gashed in the fleshy part by an axe which somebody had carelessly left in his path.

"Are you badly hurt, Mr. White?" asked Richard, shaking him gently.

The manager unclosed his eyes with an effort. He was still dazed from the blow and sick from loss of blood, but he recognized Richard and comprehended at last where he was and what had befallen him.

"Help me to the wagon, boys," he directed. "I took an ugly tumble, I guess. Was hurrying out of the dressing-tent and didn't see where I was going. I think I've cut my right leg a little. But I'll be all right after I'm patched up."

It was then that the boys discovered the seriousness of the wound in his limb, and they bound it up to the best of their skill.

"Now, then, I think I'll be able to walk, if you'll lend me your shoulders," he added, quickly. "I'm sorry to make all this trouble,

but accidents will happen sometimes, you know."

"We're thankful it wasn't any worse," put in Richard, as they started for the wagon where Mr. White could have rest and quiet and a good bed. "You've got a pretty bad cut there, sir. I ought to get a doctor to dress it."

"Rich is right," seconded Stanley, earnestly.

"Doctor—nonsense! I don't need a doctor!" protested the manager. "All I want is a little warm water and a few bandages, and I shall get along first-rate. Jean can do everything for me that's necessary. You boys must go back to the circus. They'll need you there for an hour yet. The whole show is in your hands for the present, Richard, but I'm confident you can attend to it all."

"I'll do my best," promised the president. "But you needn't worry about the boys. They can get along very well without me."

Mr. White was made comfortable in his berth, and in less than three minutes Stanley had sent Jean back with bandages and a little oil stove for heating water to cleanse the cut. For the present, at least, the boys had thought best to say nothing at all about the robbery.

Assured that the manager was in splendid hands, Richard hurried back to the dressing-tent, where Stanley had preceded him. The president was bathed in perspiration from head to foot. Never had he experienced such terrific heat, and he glanced apprehensively at the sky and wondered what the almost instantaneous change from smothering heat to a cool breeze and from a cool breeze back to a worse heat, could mean. He had not had much time to think of storms, but now he went outside the line of tents in order to get a clear view of the heavens.

What he saw was far from heartening. Huge, billowy clouds were puffing a dirty

green flecked with white over the western sky ; and as he gazed, the whole mass began to gather itself into a snaky coil whose significance was not hard to conjecture.

Richard sprinted his best back to the tents. He had seen enough to convince him that a cyclone was forming, and that Lake City and the Novelty Circus Company's grounds were directly in its path.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CYCLONE

To act quickly and wisely in an emergency is a rare ability even with men of mature intellect and reasoning power. When Richard saw that a cyclone and a dangerous one was perhaps not more than a half-hour distant, he realized that a prompt warning of the approaching storm must be given, if the people were to get out of the tents in plenty of time. In addition to this, it was imperative that the property of the company be put in such shape as would best withstand the wind and rain, and if this were accomplished, there would have to be quick work.

The first sight of the ugly, greenish-black funnel forming rapidly in the west had struck dismay to Richard's heart; but as he ran on in the direction of the big tent, he

fast regained his old coolness. In the first place, it would be necessary to word his announcement to the audience so that there might be no panic, and yet he must make the people understand that the only safety was in leaving the tent at once. Then he must think out a plan for saving the property of the company and getting Mr. White and the boys to some safe place. Everything seemed to depend upon him now, and he had to be sharp-witted.

There were seven boys in the dressing-tent, when he entered. None of them had the slightest suspicion of what was in store for them. Robert, Charles, Harvey, and Jesse were busy getting into their animal rigging for the next act, and Carl, Harry, and Ralph were sitting on some boxes close by, talking.

"Hello, Rich!" said one after another, as Richard came in.

"How is Mr. White?" asked Harvey.
"Stanley was just telling us about his fall."

"Doing nicely, when I left him. Has Stanley gone on?"

"Just this minute."

"Fellows," said Richard, hurriedly, "I don't want to frighten you, but there's a cyclone coming this way, and the circus must stop. The people will have just about time enough to get to their homes. I'm going in now to tell them to go."

Without waiting for the boys' approval, the president ran into the big tent and mounted the platform at one side of the ring. His entrance was the signal for the circus to come to an immediate stop.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began in a clear, convincing tone, although he felt his knees tremble under him. "Ladies and gentlemen," he repeated, "we have just discovered that a hard storm, in all probability a cyclone, is approaching. We dislike very much to cut short this performance, but in order to give you time to reach your homes



THE PRESIDENT MOUNTED THE PLATFORM AT ONE SIDE
OF THE RING

in safety, we must urge you to leave this tent at once. I am sure that in behalf of the Novelty Circus Company I can thank you very much for your patronage and the interest you have taken in us."

Some one cheered as Richard quietly left the stage, and others took it up. The audience understood instantly that he was taking the one and only course that lay within his power, and was grateful to him. In less than six minutes the great canvas stood empty.

But by far the most difficult task was yet to be done. Keenly alive to the situation and his duty, the president had dashed back into the dressing-tent and directed a few of the boys to pack the skins and other paraphernalia with all possible speed. Meanwhile, with the assistance of the rest of the company, the men were lowering the exhibition tent. Down it came, flat to the ground. The dining-tent suffered a like fate. Some one had brought the news of

what was happening to Mr. White and, in spite of his injuries, he hobbled out of the wagon and superintended the process of bunching the vehicles together for protection. The pitiful whinnying of the horses resulted in their being led out and turned loose, with the hope that they would return after the storm was over. The tent in which they had been quartered was hauled down and left to lie where it was.

In the west the sky presented an awful picture of the wrath of the elements. The thunder cracked and crashed roll upon roll, and the lightning played a veritable sheet of fire about everything. The funnel-shaped cloud, twisting like a serpent in its death agony, began to travel forward with a low roar as that of a distant express train, and the course it took looked to be straight for the grounds of the company.

"All the tents down yet, Ed?" shouted Richard through the blackness.

"Everything."

"Show the fellows the way to the cave, then. You know where it is. I'll help Mr. White."

"You'll have to hurry!" warned the vice-president.

"We'll get there, all right."

"Never mind me," Mr. White called out. "I'm safe enough here."

"See here, Mr. Manager, you are going with me," stated Richard, authoritatively, finding his way to him. "Do you think that the company would desert its best friend?"

"But it's a long, hard jaunt to your cave, and I'm rather a helpless invalid just now," persisted Mr. White.

"Of course, it's too much to ask you to walk it," agreed the president. "Hello! is that you, Charley?"

"Right here. Are you ready?"

The short, stocky figure of Charles Eldridge loomed mysteriously through the darkness.

“What are you going to do?” demanded Mr. White.

“Carry you according to your rank,” returned Richard.

“See here, boys——” began the manager.

But he was effectually silenced when Charley came out of one of the wagons with a small cot on his shoulders, and placed it squarely on the ground beside Mr. White.

“It’s the first time we’ve been obliged to use our ‘emergency’ cot. On it you go!” exclaimed the president, firmly.

“If you were determined to do this, why didn’t you let two of the men carry me. It’s too big a load for you boys.”

“Not a bit! We’ll do it better than the men,” interrupted Richard. “Not another word, sir! You must realize that our time is precious;” and picking up the cot, with Mr. White reclining upon it, the boys started on a gentle trot for the cave.

It was a weird procession, and one not utterly devoid of its laughable features.

Afterward, the three of them could laugh over the incident until the tears came, but they had no such inclination at the present time. There was no humor in such a load as the manager really proved to be, and they could not see a foot ahead, except for the frequent brilliant flashes of lightning. The cyclone was sweeping down upon Lake City with frightful rapidity, and the unearthly hush which lay upon everything was appalling in itself.

Scarcely a word was spoken during that journey, and the boys might have been carrying a corpse so far as any move on the part of Mr. White was concerned. The boys' throats were raw from their efforts to breathe, and their arms were almost pulled from their sockets. Fortunately, near the mouth of the cave some of the others met them and relieved them of their burden.

The cyclone was a terrible but wonderful spectacle by this time. The funnel-shaped cloud had dropped to the earth, and was

tearing, grinding, and threshing about just outside the city. It was only a matter of minutes until it would be upon them.

To the north of the commons, and on the opposite side of the road, the band was playing in Waring & Wells' Big Consolidated Shows, and the lights in their big tent were still flaring brightly. As he stood there, a faint cheering came to Richard's ears.

"Why don't they lower their tents!" he groaned. "Don't they see what's coming?"

"They don't care," said Edward.

"But some one ought to warn them. I believe I can do it myself."

"Don't you stir a step, Richard Denesmore!" ordered the vice-president, seizing Richard's coat. "You can't do any good now. The wind will reach them in a half-minute."

"But people will be hurt!" gasped the president.

"Come in the cave!" shouted Edward, pulling him backward forcibly.

As a lion fells a man with one well-directed blow of its huge paw, the cyclone struck Waring & Wells' tent, inflated it like a monstrous balloon, and in another instant had sent it crashing down to earth again, a complete wreck. On came the insane, snaky creature, whirling and shrieking, filling the air with dirt and pebbles, and devouring greedily everything in its path.

With the cyclone almost upon him, half-strangled with dust and pelted with flying *débris*, Richard turned about to crawl to safety when he saw only a few yards away the little girl from Waring & Wells, running frantically for the cave.

"Save me! Save me! Oh, I'm going to be killed!" she cried, falling almost at his feet.

The president exerted all his strength, and succeeded in half dragging, half pushing her into the cave. He had no time to follow, but threw himself flat on the ground outside, clinging to the roots and shrubs beneath him

for his very life. He felt the terrific force of the wind suck him up until his arms snapped in their joints. He remembered hitting the earth again ; then all was blackness and quiet.

CHAPTER XXII

CLETA MAKES A CONFESSION

“How are you feeling, old chap? Just about come to the conclusion you were going to sleep all day.”

“Where am I, Ed? Is the cyclone over?” demanded Richard, sitting up in his berth and staring at the vice-president in a bewildered way. The sun was shining brightly into the little windows of the wagon, and Edward was sitting beside the bunk in which the president lay.

“I should think the cyclone was over!” exclaimed Edward. “This is Saturday morning,—the cyclone was last night.”

“But where have I been since—since ——” Richard could get no farther, so great was his amazement.

“Well, you’ve been unconscious part of the time, and the rest you’ve used up sleeping.”

"Can't you tell a fellow what's happened to him?"

"Wait a minute 'til I get your breakfast," said the vice-president. He stepped quickly to the door in response to a sharp tap, and took a temptingly-loaded tray from Jean's hands. "Better come in, Jean," he added. "Probably Rich will be glad to see the man who helped carry him back."

"I carried back? Come now, Ed, what does all this mean, anyway? Jean, can't you induce this fellow to talk?"

"Ze deuce make him—yes!" smiled the Frenchman, broadly.

"Well, I'll explain, if you'll fall to on that breakfast," Edward condescended; "but first, this may give you some inkling as to the truth."

The vice-president reached for a small hand mirror that hung near the bunk, and handed it to Richard. The latter looked at himself, whistled, and made a wry face. His cheeks and forehead bore numerous cuts and

bruises, and bandages were wrapped about a large, broad gash in his head.

"Why, I look as if I'd been in a prize fight!" he speculated, laughing. "How did I get them? The last I remember, I was hanging to some bushes for all I was worth."

"And it's mighty lucky you did, too," said Edward. "If you hadn't, there's no telling where you'd have been now. You know I tried to drag you back into the cave, but you saw the girl running in our direction, and you jerked loose from me and succeeded in getting her inside."

"Yes," agreed Richard, impatiently, "and then I threw myself flat on the ground and clutched anything I could lay hands on. What next?"

"Well, when the wind struck us, it must have lifted you and banged you around considerably, for we found you fifteen or twenty feet away with pieces of bushes and roots of some kind still in your hands. We thought that you struck on your head in some man-

ner, because there was a big gash in it and you were insensible. The cyclone was over in two minutes, and the strangest part of it all was that it didn't rain ten drops."

"You say I was unconscious?"

"Yes, and some of us thought you were dead at first. It was a wonder you weren't killed, the knocks you got! It took us over two hours to bring you to, and then you only stared around a minute, ate something, and went straight back to sleep."

"But how did you get me back from the cave, and how did ——"

"Hold on! Everything in good time, you know. Won't do to excite a man who has had an experience like yours. Uncle felt a good deal stronger, and said he could walk back all right, if we'd let him take it easy. So we bundled you on the cot, and Jean and Walker carried you. The rest of us went over to see what we could do for Waring & Wells."

"Oh, yes, I was just going to ask about

that!" exclaimed Richard, surprised beyond expression at his friend's revelations.

"All of us, except Uncle Will, Jean, Walker, and yourself, rushed across the commons and pitched in to do what we could in straightening things for the other circus. We really hadn't any business to do it, after the way they treated us, but somehow you can't bear any grudge at such a time as that."

"Was anybody killed?"

"Not a soul that I know of, though some came very near it. A good many were hurt, of course,—a few of them badly. Legs and arms broken, mostly. You see, the wind lifted the canvas off the poles, and they dropped."

The president shuddered.

"I was afraid of that," he said. "But I'm glad none were killed."

"Pure luck that there weren't," declared Edward. "If they saw the storm coming, which I think they must have, and failed

to notify the people, they deserve to have a few damage suits on their hands. Their canvas was torn to shreds."

"How about ours?" inquired Richard, hastily.

"Wind never touched it! You see, the cyclone only tore up a strip about a quarter of a mile wide, and it went several rods east of here, just right to strike the cave. All through?"

"And I've eaten like a pig in the bargain," answered the president, pushing his tray to the foot of the berth, and preparing to get up and dress.

"Hold! My instructions are for the invalid to stay in bed an hour longer," joked Edward.

"Nonsense, Ed! I'll feel better for stretching myself a bit, even if my head does look a little fancy. What time is it?"

"Half past nine."

"Half past nine!" repeated Richard.

"And I'll wager you were up at six or five."

"Seven," corrected Edward. "We were all worn out from last night."

"What time do we start for home?"

"Right after dinner. We get back early Monday morning. Hello! here's Uncle Will."

"By the great horn spoon!—Pardon me, nephew," observed Mr. White, with a nod and smile to Edward. "Your expression came in pat when I saw Richard here, up and dressing."

The genial manager came close to the wagon, only a slight stiffness in his right leg apparent as the result of his accident.

"How are you, Mr. White?" asked the president.

"Doing splendidly. I sent for a doctor for you late last night, and he fixed me up in pretty good shape before he left. We have had some great adventures, haven't we, and the great part of it is that they've turned

out so well, or rather, with so few bad consequences. How are you feeling, Richard?"

"I asked that question when he first opened his eyes, and he hasn't got around to answer me yet," declared the vice-president.

"Why, I'm all right—a little light-headed, that's all."

"There's a young lady waiting to see you," added Mr. White.

"A young lady?"

"The little girl from Waring & Wells, in other words. Cleta—I think she said her name was. She says you saved her life, and she wants to thank you."

"All I did was to get her into the cave," said Richard.

"Which act probably saved her life, nevertheless. She could never have stood the pounding you received."

"She'd have gotten to the cave, anyway, without my help," insisted the president.

"I don't know about that. Edward tells

me that she stumbled and fell. That would have prevented her."

"Where is she now?" asked Richard, now fully dressed.

"I left her in the dining-tent when I came away," returned the manager. "She's been here an hour waiting for you."

"Come now, Rich," urged Edward, laughing and locking arms with the president. "You must play the gallant gentleman and hero for awhile. Behold the princess is waiting to thank you for her life, and the boys all want to see you. You mustn't be slow at a time like this."

Richard's face crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"Stop your bantering," he begged. "I haven't done anything to make a fuss over."

"I'm not bantering; I mean it," continued the vice-president.

"Come over to the dining-tent, Richard," urged Mr. White. "Cleta won't hurt you,

—especially after she sees the bandage on your head. I think, Richard, that she has something important to say, but she won't speak of it until she has seen you."

"Well, I'll go, if you say so," consented the president at last, rather reluctantly. "But I don't like the business at all!"

Cleta, as the little girl from Waring & Wells called herself, had come over to the camp of the Novelty Circus Company early that morning, asking to see the "boy who had saved her life." Mr. White promised her that she should see Richard as soon as he felt able to get up, and for an hour or more she had been sitting patiently in the dining-tent, waiting. She could not have been over thirteen or fourteen years old, but the outlandish dress she was wearing made her appear much older. Her small, sharp eyes watched the entrance to the tent continually, and she would enter into conversation with no one, not even Mr. White himself. When the president, accompanied by

Edward and his uncle, came in, she jumped from her chair expectantly, recognizing Richard almost instantly; and walking up to him, she held out her hand shyly and awkwardly.

"You saved my life, mister, and I ain't played fair!" she said in her shrill, girlish voice. "I was the one that stole the skins from your show and hid them in the cave last night. I stole them after your afternoon show was out."

There was not a member of the company present who had not made up his mind that the little girl from Waring & Wells had taken the animal skins and concealed them in the cave, but the frankness of this confession startled them.

"Did you make several trips back and forth to carry them to the cave?" questioned Mr. White.

"Me? No, sir-ee, I carried them all at once. I'm a good deal stronger than you think I am," and Cleta drew herself to her

full height. "And I stole fifty dollars in bills from your ticket-wagon last night before the cyclone."

Mr. White looked astonished.

"We hadn't told you about it," put in Stanley, quickly, "because of your getting hurt and the cyclone, and so forth. We—that is Richard and I—were just coming to let you know about it when we found you unconscious. Just about five minutes before that, Richard climbed into the wagon, and we stood there talking about his luck in finding the skins in time for the evening performance. I thought I had put all the money received from the evening show in a place where it wouldn't be possible for any one outside to get at it, but it seems that a bunch of bills I had tucked on top of the money box had somehow rolled down on the counter in front of the window. I had my back partly to the window, but Rich happened to glance that way and see an arm poked through. He jumped and got there

too late. He couldn't find a trace of any one outside."

"I hid under the wagon so he couldn't see me just like I did when I got the money from the wagon at Corey," said Cleta.

"At Corey?" repeated Mr. White, beginning to see things in their true light.

"Yes. I hid under the wagon, and after he"—she pointed to Ralph—"went away, I got the bills while you were talking, and run around the dining-tent."

"Of all things!" exclaimed the manager. "Then did you take money from us once before that?"

"Once," answered the little girl, almost defiantly.

"Tell me, little girl, what made you do it?" asked Mr. White.

"I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to steal the money, mister, and I didn't want to steal the skins, either. Daddy was awful mad at you 'cause you spoiled our show, and he made me."

“What kind of a looking man is he?”

“He’s got black eyes and black hair just like me, and he’s big and strong, and he’s got a big scar on his hand where he got burned once,” replied the child, brokenly.

“The ‘ugly man,’ or I’m dreaming!” ejaculated Edward under his breath.

“And he made you do these things?” questioned the manager with rising indignation.

“He beat me if I didn’t, and he said you were spoiling our circus ——”

“The scoundrel! He ought to spend a few years in the penitentiary for such treatment!” exclaimed the manager with more energy than discretion.

“Oh, you won’t hurt my daddy, will you, mister? I don’t care what you do with me, but don’t, don’t hurt my daddy!”

Cleta had burst into a passionate flood of tears, and had thrown herself imploringly at Mr. White’s feet.

CHAPTER XXIII

AND NOW FOR COLLEGE

"GET up, Cleta," said Mr. White, kindly. "I promise you that I will not hurt your father. But I'm going over with you now to see him and talk with him."

"You won't hurt my daddy?" persisted the child, looking at the manager, her eyes swollen with tears. "Tell me you won't hurt him! He's the only daddy I've got."

"I won't harm him," Mr. White reassured her. "I just want to speak to him, and find out if he intends to turn over a new leaf from now on."

"Boys," the manager added, turning to the group standing about him and the little girl, "boys, I want to congratulate you all, and especially Richard and Ralph, that everything concerning these thefts has been cleared up, and that you are as free from

blame in the matter as I earnestly wished to believe. The company stands wholly exonerated, and it will be the best thing for us to forget, as soon as possible, that the unfortunate affair ever happened, or that I suspected any of you in the least. I was not to blame that I was forced to think unpleasant things, and it was not your fault that circumstances wove themselves in just the way they did.

“And, further, I cannot believe at this time that Cleta would have done wrong, had there not been some one back of it all who obliged her, and we must not be too hard upon her until the whole story is learned. I am going with her to her father, and I hope I shall find out just what part and why he and his daughter have in the matter.”

The manager quickly left the dining-tent with the little girl, and the odd pair walked across the commons in the direction of War-
& Wells. The storm of the night before had so badly damaged the equipment of the

rival circus that they had found it necessary to delay departure from Lake City in order to make repairs.

“Well, fellows,” observed the president, when Mr. White was some distance away, “it’s a grand good thing that this money business has been explained once and for all. I was sure that not a one in the company had anything to do with it, though it did look rather suspicious in regard to Ralph and myself. Mr. White had a perfect right to think as he did on the subject, but down in his heart, I don’t think he had much idea that any of us were mixed up in it. There’s Ralph over there. I want to shake hands with him.”

“Strong circumstantial evidence—but acquitted by confession of real criminal!” put in Edward—who would have his joke—as Ralph and the president clasped hands.

“I don’t know how you feel about it, Ralph,” said Richard, “but I’m mighty glad that I haven’t got to carry the uncertainty

around with me any longer. I wanted to have the riddle solved, and I was afraid it never would be."

"That's my case, exactly," said Ralph.

"By the great horn spoon!" exclaimed the vice-president, enthusiastically. "'All's well that ends well!' Now, if uncle can induce the 'ugly man' to reform himself."

"Do you think he'll succeed?" asked Richard.

"Well," answered Edward, modestly, "of course, I can't say whether he will or he won't under the circumstances. You fellows have known him long enough by this time to see that he usually does what he sets out to do. But he's got an awful proposition before him when he attempts to tame that fellow from Waring & Wells."

"That he has," agreed Ralph and the president.

But if any one was fully aware of what he had to deal with, that person was Mr. White himself. As he walked along with Cleta,

turning over and over in his mind the words he was to speak to her father, he began to realize that the task he had undertaken was by no means an easy one, nor did there exist for his plan any great promise of success. He had resolved upon a bold move, and he was determined to put it through, no matter what the result might be.

If the manager of the Novelty Circus Company had a lucky star, it seemed to be shining propitiously upon him now. He had feared that he would not be able to find Clela's father alone, but as he and the little girl set foot upon the show grounds of Waring & Wells, the "ugly man," as the fellow had come to be known among the boys, was the first person about the circus that they saw. He was sitting in the midst of a section of torn canvas, sewing it together with broad, even stabs of a big needle. Mr. White fully expected to find him in an ugly mood on account of the extensive damage wrought by the cyclone, and he prepared himself to

endure any amount of abuse in order to gain his point, or at least say what he had come to speak about.

The "ugly man" did not perceive the manager and Cleta until they were almost upon him. Then he glanced up with a look of surprise that changed immediately into hatred. Mr. White concluded that in the additional stress of the hurried repairs which were being made, Cleta's father had not known that she was away, and was angry at seeing her return in company with the manager of the Novelty Circus Company.

"Cleta," he demanded, harshly, "where you been? An' what you been doin'?"

Mr. White came up as close to him as possible, as the little girl threw herself into her father's arms.

"Sir," said the manager, "I came over to talk with you. Your little girl has been telling us all about this miserable business,—how she took the money and the skins, and so forth, and I want ——"

An oath broke from the "ugly man's" lips, but he smothered it, half-said. "Cleta!" he cried out. "Cleta, what did you do it for? That's the finish of my job here! An' just as we were getting together a little something ——"

For an instant he broke down utterly. Then he turned fiercely to Mr. White.

"What you goin' to do about it?" he snarled.

Before the manager could frame a reply, Cleta burst out with :

"I couldn't help telling them, daddy. Last night when I saw the cyclone coming, I was so scared and I tried to find you but I couldn't. Then I thought of the cave where I hid the skins, you know—and I ran that way as fast as I could, but I fell down just before I got to it, and one of the boys in their show picked me up and pushed me inside. He didn't have time to get in himself, and the cyclone cut his head open and almost killed him, I guess."

“Is that right?” demanded the “ugly man” of Mr. White.

“Yes,” replied the manager. “Richard Denesmore, the boy you’ve been threatening, was the one that picked her up and got her inside just in time. She could never have stood the pounding he got when the wind struck us.”

“Look here!” exclaimed Cleta’s father, suddenly; “you think I’m a tough one, an’ you’ve got a right to think so. But you don’t know all about it. The threatenin’ wasn’t all my doin’. If I lose my job for it, I’m bound to tell you who was back of it all, and that was Wells himself. You was ruinin’ our show—you know that well enough. I was to get a hundred dollars extra for what I did to prevent you fellows from showin’, provided I could do it without gettin’ caught. I’ve been a-savin’ for years for a little home for us—Cleta and I—my wife died years ago in this same circus. I didn’t relish the job particular, but it was

easy money, and you was nothin' to me. I couldn't do the stealin' clever enough, but the girl could, and I made her."

"She says you beat her," interrupted Mr. White.

"Well, I did—but only twice, and it near took the heart out of me. I had to do it though, if I was goin' to get my money. There's no man dares say I don't love her and live. She's all I've got left."

"I believe you're telling me the truth," said Mr. White, "and I have a proposition to make to you. This circus is no place to bring up a little girl. It would be much better if you had the little home you speak of, and could settle down and live respectably. Cleta should have an education. You remember Quarry, the place you exhibited in six weeks ago. I happen to know of good employment there for an honest, hard-working man, and a chance to rise and be earning a nice little sum in a year or two. The question is, do you want the chance?"

“I do,” answered the other, earnestly. “As you say, this show ain’t the place for Cleta. Mrs. Wells was the only woman to be a mother to her, an’ she might as well had nobody as her! I’ll take your offer, sir!”

“We start back to Quarry this afternoon, and I will arrange it some way so that you can accompany us,” added Mr. White. “I’ll see Wells about your quitting work here.”

“About that money Cleta took, I had to turn it all over to Wells, or I’d pay it back,” said the little girl’s father. “I’ll get it back to you some time, if I can, but you’ll never wring it out of Wells unless you bring suit.”

“If that’s the case, I shan’t bother about the money, although I shall see that Wells knows that I’m up to his methods. You needn’t worry so much about your responsibility in the matter.”

And so ended the pathetic—for it was pathetic—interview between Mr. White and the man who had been known as “ugly,”

though he deserved that title no longer. When Mr. White returned to the camp of the Novelty Circus Company, he was not alone. Cleta Daily and her father were with him, and great was the surprise among the boys when the manager explained in a few, well-chosen words just what had occurred. Afterward, Mr. White told Richard the whole conversation just as it had taken place, and there was not a happier boy than the president when he realized that his courage in rescuing Cleta had brought about such splendid results.

The hour before dinner was busily spent in packing up for the journey home ; and as for the dinner itself, Jean, with his characteristic good-heartedness, exerted his utmost to make it a triumph in the culinary art. When they sat down to the table, all expressed grave fears of ever being able to rise from it. Altogether, there had not been a jollier repast during the whole trip. Every one felt in prime spirits ; every one was good-natured ;

and as Edward put it, "the lid was taken off and things simply boiled over!"

Howsoever that may have been, a more enjoyable hour had never been spent by the members of the Novelty Circus Company on their circus tour. When the dessert had come and mysteriously disappeared, Mr. White rose from his chair and announced that they would start for Quarry at half-past one, and that in twenty minutes—giving Jean an opportunity to clear the tables—the financial committee would be ready to submit its report.

The anticipation of what the boys guessed was coming filled that twenty minute interval with considerable excitement, and its expiration found every one eagerly awaiting the climax—their pay-checks.

"Members of the Novelty Circus Company and esteemed fellow comrades," began Mr. White, when they had reassembled in the dining-tent, "I did not prepare a set speech for this occasion, for a set speech would have

been out of place at a time like this. I simply want to thank you in the warmest manner possible for the enjoyable excursion you have given me. You have conducted yourselves as gentlemen, worked faithfully, and, I trust, gotten a great deal of fun out of the trip. I am glad we took this trip, and I am equally glad that I can give you these well-earned checks."

Richard arose, and took the bunch of envelopes handed him with a bow of acknowledgment.

"The Novelty Circus Company," said he, "in fact, each and every member of it, wants to thank you for the best time ever known. And besides that, we shall always think of you as the man who is behind the years at college which this money is to pay for."

Richard quickly distributed the envelopes, and when all had been taken, the boys drew forth their checks, and looked at their value in astonishment.

Each check was payable for seven hundred dollars !

“ Three big, rousing cheers for Mr. White, fellows ! ” exclaimed the president.

The noise had scarcely subsided and Mr. White thanked them, before Robert called out :

“ Three more for college ! ” And he led them with a zest.

“ Fellows, we must not forget the dear old company ! ” put in Edward. “ Ready now ! ”

And Mr. White, laughing, swung his hat in the air and shouted with the rest :

Rah ! rah ! rah ! rah !

N. C. C. N. C. C.

Zoo ! Zip ! Zim ! Zizz !

Nov-el-ty—Cir-cus—Com-pany-ee !

Rah ! rah ! rah ! rah !

N. C. C. N. C. C.

The greatest show on earth is ours !

Nov-el-ty—Cir-cus—Com-pany-ee !

THE END

